# Dark Frontier Blues 2

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## 【Prologue】

At last, he could see the light - and in his ears, the howling of the wind.

“...Finally, the exit.” The snow all around him reflected the light onto the boy. A fierce blizzard swept across the land, not even allowing him to lift his face. The cold seeped into his bones. As the boy emerged from the tunnel, he looked down at the town from the hilltop. The town where he was born and raised was also buried in snow.

But it was no longer a town of the living. All the buildings had collapsed, leaned, or crumbled. The townscape resembled nothing so much as a graveyard. And from somewhere within that graveyard, countless gunshots could be heard all the way here.

“Big bro, wait for me!”

Called out to, the boy turned around.

“Bauser’s old man’s pulling off quite a stunt, isn’t he?” Emerging from the dark tunnel were about ten figures. All were twelve or thirteen years old—young soldiers uniformly clad in white winter field uniforms.

“Hey, hey, big brother Reys…” A young soldier called out, out of breath. “Can we really escape from here… without the Demon God finding us?" It was the continental common tongue, spoken with a heavy accent.

The boy called Reys had dark skin and gleaming black eyes. His black hair wasn’t frizzy, but he likely had some Afro-descendant blood in him. Looking closely, you could see earrings dangling from both ears. He had a defiant face with a sharp, intimidating presence. “How the hell should I know, you idiot?” He twisted his thick lips as he looked at the map. “That’s why I’m here to find out. Don’t ask me stupid questions.”

“But come on, the Evil Spirit isn’t stupid enough to just let this place slip by, right?”

Several anxious faces nodded in agreement. But Reys, fighting off the cold, sniffed. “Anyway... the Demon God blocked every other route. This is the only one left, you know.” Reys flashed a defiant smile. The other boys smiled back at him.

He’d always been a strangely dependable boy.

“Still...” Reys listened intently to the sound of the wind around them once more. The tunnel was quite large. About ten meters in diameter. Meltwater dripped from the concrete ceiling like rain.

“Whether there’s an Evil Spirit ahead or not... we can just have someone else check it out, right?”

“Yeah, why does it have to be our squad? We’re getting the short end of the stick here.”

“I mean, seriously… You’ve drawn straw, didn’t you, bro?”

At the question, Reys’ eyes widened. “Huh? How did you guys figure that out?”

The young soldiers all hung their heads in unison. “This is it! This is sooo bad! Sooo unlucky!”

“I mean, seriously, you should’ve told us before we drew! Then I would’ve drawn it instead!”

“Shut up, you guys! I’m the squad leader here!” Grumbling, Reize pointed at one of the boys. “Arkin, you, go to the rear as a messenger. Tell the escape unit to advance to this spot.”

"What about you, Reys?"
"We're moving forward another five hundred meters." Glancing at the map, Reys nodded. "It's still a kilometer to the city limits. Old man Bauser can't buy us time forever."
"Got it," the young soldier said, then dashed off to the rear.
Reys tucked the map away. "Alright, let's move. Spread out again."
"Ugh, we always get the short end of the stick."
"You bet, I'm sick of this. I just want a break." Voicing their complaints, the young soldiers scattered to the left and right... and that was when it happened.
"Re-Reys!" He was called out to suddenly. In a voice loud enough to split the air.
"You idiot, your voice is way too loud!"
"More importantly, that Arkin guy…" The young soldiers all turned around at once… and froze.
The darkness was glowing a deep crimson. A dance of light reminiscent of the aurora spread through the underground tunnel. But that dance was accompanied by a rumbling from the pitch blackness, closing in on the frozen Arkin.
"It's a space-time distortion!"
"Run, Arkin!" The young soldiers shouted, cocking their rifles and raising their barrels.
But Arkin could do nothing but stare up at the vortex of light swelling before his eyes.
"Ah… ahhh…"
"Buru Dagash… Gire! Buru Dagash…" With a roar, a colossal figure burst forth from another dimension. The giant, nearly three meters tall, was covered head to toe in blue carapace and white fur. From its disproportionately long arms extended two machete-like claws.
A High-Ranking Evil Spirit.
The Evil Spirits classified into twelve ranks. This one had a rank of Eleven, one of the lower-tier beings. But even so, it was no match for humans. As if to prove this, the blizzard giant Durga brought its massive claws down upon Arkin's head.
"Arkin! Run...!" Reys shouted, then watched helplessly as his comrade was sliced clean in two by the massive mass of flesh. Blood spattered; his human form vanished. He had been his childhood friend.
"Damn it, take him down!" The young soldiers' rifles opened fire. Though single-shot weapons, their trained aim was relentless, and the bullets struck the Evil Spirit without pause. Precious Zodanium armor-piercing rounds tore through the blue colossus.
"Buru Dagash! Gire! Buru Dagash!" But the carapace of the Demon God Durga was no ordinary armor. Half the shots were deflected by the thick shell. And they were still over two hundred meters away. Sparks flying, the Demon God advanced, closing the distance with the young soldiers.
"Aim for the neck! It's exposed!" Reys calmly strained his eyes into the darkness. "Aim for the gaps where the shell breaks!" Only then did Reys raise his rifle at the evil spirit. It was a 7.62mm sniper rifle equipped with a scope—unlike the others'. He quickly raised the muzzle and aimed at the Demon God's neck. He steadied his breath. In less than a second…
"...Die." He squeezed the trigger as if clenching a fist. The cold, ruthless bullet pierced a hole through the Demon God's flesh. In the darkness, he masterfully struck the

Demon God's weak point from nearly two hundred meters away. Spewing a bluish-black fluid from its throat, the Demon God let out a furious roar.

"Buru Dagash! Gire! Buru Dagash!"

Ignoring the screams, Reys kept his aim steady. He pulled the slide back and chambered another round. Aiming for Durga's writhing eye, he squeezed the trigger.

"This is for Arkin!" As he chanted the spell once more, Reys's bullet pierced the Demon God's eye and passed through its skull. Fluid spurted out from the back of the giant's head. The white colossus dropped to its knees and began to slowly dissolve into the muddy puddle in the tunnel.

"Phew…" Reys let out a sigh of relief.

His comrades, who had been holding their breath, finally let out a cheer. We did it, bro! You're a total badass!"

"I mean, seriously, you're the best sniper in the Volunteer Army!"

The young soldiers raised their hands high and clapped palms together. Reys ran over to the remains of the demon god Durga, then looked down at what remained of Arkin. He bit his lip and lowered his gaze. But his ears suddenly picked up the sound of multiple gunshots. Screams erupted simultaneously. From deep within the tunnel, the Demon God's roar thundered once more.

"Tch, gi, gi, gi, gi, gi..."

"This is bad! It's the evacuation team!" Reiz loaded a round into his sniper rifle. "There's nothing but women, children, and the wounded over there! If they get hit head-on, they'll all be wiped out!" Shouting, Reys hurriedly kicked up the mud.

"W-wait for us, big bro!" The young soldiers clutched their guns and ran back into the depths of the darkness. The overlapping screams gradually turned into death throes.

"Squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak…" Piercing through space, numerous blue legs equipped with sharp claws burst out from another dimension. They were hideous, misshapen hybrids of crabs and spiders, each about two meters long. The Rank-Eleven Demon God, the Evil Spirit Swarm, I-Riv, emerged in a swarm of about twenty, flooding the underground tunnel.

"All units, open fire!" The escort commander raised his right hand. The soldiers, holding single-shot rifles, opened fire in unison. The tunnel filled with the roar of gunfire and the stench of gunpowder - but the swarm easily dodged the volley and began charging forward like mad. Closing the distance at breakneck speed, they pounced on the escort unit.

"W-waaah!" The soldiers at the front were grabbed head-on by the Demon Gods. They were thrown to the ground, screaming in agony. Their throats were slit by sharp fangs, and their lower abdomens were ripped open by claws. The demon god I-Riv continued its charge.

"Retreat! Retreat!" Someone's scream echoed through the air. "Get back to the residential zone! We'll get wiped out if we stay here!" About ten six-wheeled trucks were lined up in the tunnel - but the convoy couldn't just suddenly turn around. Frantic drivers honked their horns, and the warning sounds only stoked the sense of urgency. "Back up, quick! You idiots!"

"The Demon God is coming! Hurry! We won't make it!" The truck beds were packed with people: the elderly, children, pregnant women and soldiers covered in

bandages. Even these defenseless people scrambled to jump off the truck beds, while those who couldn't escape let out screams.

"Wait for me! Don't leave me behind!"

"The child... please, take care of my child!"

The Evil Gods pounced on the panicked crowd. They crashed into the truck cabs and scrambled up onto the beds. Blood and screams spattered everywhere.

"Chi, gi, gi, gi, gi, gi…" The evil gods' cries of joy echoed. The wave of people trying to escape surged back through the underpass like a raging torrent. But from within that frenzied torrent...

"...Waaah!" A little girl was knocked flying. The force of the impact sent the dog plushie she was holding tumbling to the ground. The girl immediately ran over to her mud-covered treasure. "Oh no, Perro!" Ignoring the mud, she clutched the dog plushie tightly in both hands. Paying no heed to the adults scrambling to escape, the girl let out a relieved smile. "It's okay, Perro. When we get back to the room, I'll will wash you clean."

As she said this and looked up, the girl froze in place.

Someone called out the girl's name.

But there was no one to save her.

The little girl could only look up at the demon swarm overhead. The hideous monsters, drooling, growled and crept closer.

"Re… Reys..." Hugging the doll, Rimuro closed her eyes. "Reys, help me! Big brother!"

Chink! The bullet, racing through the tunnel, struck the Demon God's arm. The blow, which sank into its carapace and shattered flesh and bone, blew the spirit's arm clean off.

"Reys!" Hearing that reassuring voice, the girl opened her eyes. In that instant, she saw a small light deep within the darkness. It was reflecting off of Reys's earring as he rushed to her side.

"Stay down, Rimuro!" In a standing firing position, Reys rapidly fired bursts from his prized sniper rifle.

Reload, aim, pull the trigger. He completed that sequence of movements in two seconds. Precise shots pierced the evil spirit swarm one after another. His godlike skill halted their brutal charge.

"Ch, gi, gi, gi, gi, gi... Click, click, click, click, click, click..." The horde was thrown into disarray by the fire coming from behind. Their shells clattered together as they scrambled for an escape route. Just then, the young soldiers arrived, running from the end of the tunnel. They froze at the sight of the bodies strewn at the feet of the evil spirits.

"Bro! This is crazy!"

"Wait, isn't that Rimuro?!"

"Yeah, so aim carefully!" Reys shouted to his scattered comrades.

"Keep firing until everyone gets to safety!"

"Ooh," his comrades responded, opening fire. The young soldiers didn't have the same skill as Reys, but to avoid being caught off guard while reloading, they continued firing in rotation.

"You made it, Reys!"

"Get into position! We're joining the fight too!" The escort unit, which had been retreating, launched a pincer attack. Under the relentless barrage of gunfire, the Evil Spirit was forced to retreat to the edge of the tunnel.

"Don't let your guard down—we're surrounding him!" But right before their eyes, space-time began to warp once more. The tunnel resonated with a roar.

"Buru Dagash! Gire! Buru Dagash!" At that voice, the Demon God I-Riv reacted as well.

"Chi, gi, gi, gi, gi, gi…"

Reys held his breath and steadied himself.

"Demon reinforcements are coming! Everyone, fall back!"

Emerging from the distortion of space-time was the colossal form of Durga, the High God of Evil. The blue giant slowly stepped into the underground tunnel. The surviving I-Riv swarmed toward that massive body—onto its shoulders, knees, and elbows. Shouting with joy, the I-Riv began driving their claws into the giant's flesh. Durga, too, welcomed this act of fusion with a cry of delight.

"This is bad! Quick! Zodanium rounds…!" The escort unit simultaneously rained bullets down upon Durga's colossal form - but the body of the fusing Demon God paid no heed to the gunfire, letting out a screech of retaliation.

"Gire! Buru Dagash! Chi, gi, gi, gi, gi, gi!"

"Watch out! Get back!" Reys' warning came too late. The soldiers in the front ranks were sliced in two with a single blow. Trampling over their remains, the Synthetic Demon God advanced. Chasing after the retreating civilians, it closed in on an abandoned truck. It flashed its claws once more. The six-wheeled vehicle shattered into pieces with a screech.

"Damn it, what kind of monster is this?!" The boys were firing their guns at the Demon God's back, but not a single bullet sank into its flesh. This was no longer a Demon God of the Chief Rank. They were facing a higher-ranked Demon God of the Tenth Rank, the actual Demon Rank.

Reys pulled the remaining rounds from his belt. "It's the same as before. The target is…" He abruptly and frantically called a halt to his comrades' firing. "Stop it, you guys! You'll hit Rimuro!" Looking down, he saw Rimuro curled up and trembling at the synthetic Demon God's feet. She looked up at the synthetic Demon God's leisurely stride with a face on the verge of tears.

"Rimuro, run away!"

The girl, still clutching the dog doll, called out to Reize, who was far away, for help. "Reys! Help me!"

In response to Rimuro's anguished cry, the Synthetic Demon God roared gleefully. It looked down at its feet, drooling over its tiny prey. "Gire! Buru Dagash! Chi, gi, gi, gi, gi, gi!"

"Reys!"

The Evil Spirit raised its massive claw and brought it crashing down on Rimuro in one swift motion.

"Rimurooo!"

"Rimuro, run!" Even the fleeing wounded turned back and shouted.

Rimuro closed her eyes.

Reys tried to dash away from the spot. Then, from above his head...

A crimson gust of wind plunged down.

There were several ventilation shafts in the tunnel ceiling. From one of them, a deep crimson flash of lightning suddenly plummeted down.

“Yeeeeeeeeeeah!”

It was a roar like thunder.

Her cloak billowing, she swung a sword as thick as steel down from above. The blow slammed into the Synthetic Demon God’s right arm with a loud crack.

“Gire! Bull Dagash! Chi-i-i-ii-i!!!”

Bathed in spattering bodily fluids, she blocked the demon god’s arm with her formidable blade. “Phew made it just in time! I’m the best!”

It was an unusually cheerful, powerful voice.

Her deep red eyes were ablaze with brilliance, and her soiled cloak billowed like a battle standard. The clashing blades of the greatsword sent sparks of holy light flying with a crackling sound. She carried another identical sword on her back as well. Her eyes were filled with the vitality characteristic of the Romana people – and yet, she appeared to be only in her mid-teens. But what echoed through the tunnel was a powerful voice reminiscent of a war god's roar.
"Ugh, I'm sick of finding evil spirits everywhere I look!" She thrust the Zodanium Greatsword into the Demon's massive body, sending it flying. As it retreated, she slashed diagonally across its chest. Ignoring its hard carapace, she smashed it to pieces, tearing through its flesh.
"Gire! Buru Dagash!" The evil god screamed as its bodily fluids sprayed into the air.
With a look of satisfaction, she licked her red lips.
"W-wow... that's amazing..." Reys swallowed hard.
To be able to fight an evil god on equal footing all by herself...
There's no way a human like that could exist. But the girl standing right in front of him...
"Rage! Buru Dagash!" The synthetic demon god let out a furious roar and shook his right arm. With a cracking sound, the severed claws regenerated in the blink of an eye. "Rage! Bull Dagash!"
"Aren't you a persistent little knave!" Shouting, she swung her greatsword to the side. The claws and the greatsword collided head-on. But just as a shrill metallic clang rang out, the Synthetic Demon God started vomiting mucus from its mouth. Yellow bile rained down from above.
"Gah!" She tried to shake off the greatsword, but the Synthetic Demon God's brute strength wouldn't let her. Leaving her weapon in the enemy's hands, she leapt backward. The scattered mucus sizzled as it scorched the floor.
"You fool! What the hell are you doing?!" Reys hurriedly readjusted his sniper rifle. "What do you plan to do without a weapon?!" He tried to aim for covering fire.
But the figure reflected in the scope… was smiling. With a terrifying smile. That smile—born only in the heat of battle—sent a chill down Reys's spine. And then she…
"Don't worry, I'll take it back later!" As soon as she said it, she twisted her left wrist in a direction it shouldn't have been able to turn, pulling her upper arm right off.
What emerged from within was the barrel of a 40mm automatic grenade launcher. She quickly took aim and licked her lips.
"This is as far as you go…!" A series of deafening roars echoed in rapid succession. Grenades embedded themselves in the Demon God's head, blowing off its arms. They tore off its legs and sliced through its shoulders.
It was a barrage of fire so vicious it bordered on cruelty.
"Gire! Buru Dagash!" The Demon God gasped and writhed in agony - yet it showed no sign of stopping its attack. Everyone shuddered.
"Gire! Buru Dagash! Gire! Buru Da...!" Finally, the Demon God's torso snapped in two.
A torrent of blue-black fluid gushed onto the floor. The once-synthetic demon god collapsed lifelessly into the mud.
"S-She..." The child soldiers trembled in fear before the crimson warrior.
Reys, too, groaned softly at her true identity. "The Battle Armor Demon..." He uttered the name with dread. "That's the Battle Armor Demon......"
Whether they fled or fought, they all understood.

An ultimate weapon with every part of its body—except the brain—artificially constructed and equipped with countless built-in weapons. The embodiment of war. That is the Battle Armor Demon.

They heard legends of her, but the real thing was even more terrifying.

“You made me all worked up, you bastard…” She pulled her greatsword out of the mass of flesh. She wiped the bodily fluids from the blade with the hem of her cloak

“Big sister, who are you?”

The crimson-armored demon smiled brightly and sheathed her greatsword behind her back. “Me? Well...” She swept her bangs aside with exaggerated grace. “Well, I’m one of those ‘champions of justice,’ I suppose.”

“Hey, look out!” Suddenly, Reys pointed at the corpse of the Evil Spirit.

“Squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak, squeak!”

The Evil Spirit of I-Liv, which had been swarming over the colossal body, were breaking apart once more. The blue spider, having escaped its host, trembled as it leaped toward the Battle Armor Demon’s back.

“It’s still not dead yet...!”

The Battle Armor Demon placed her hand on the hilt of her greatsword once more.

But from above, a new voice rang out.

“First strike!” A clear voice, resonating with great force.

Reys looked up at the ceiling in astonishment. Following the crimson gale, this time... a pure-white angel descended. A pristine robe reminiscent of a white waterfowl. His robe fluttering as he fell, a petite boy stepped down. In his hand was a shining holy staff. The boy thrust the sacred seal he had formed toward the Evil Spirit Swarm.

“Circular Shockwave!” A bolt of lightning shot forth from the boy’s holy seal. The lightning roared as it charged toward the Evil Spirits. I-Liv scattered instantly - but the lightning also scattered in midair. The lightning bolts that pursued the evil spirits smashed through their hard shells and blew them away. In an instant, the four evil spirits had vanished without a trace.

“You really are persistent, aren’t you?!” Clan in deep-red, the Battle Armor Demon also reached for a large pistol at her waist - but the blond boy shoved her aside and raised his holy seal once more.

“Leave it to me, Riot! Second strike!” The boy shouted his command once more at the charging horde of evil gods. “Sacred Inferno Downfall!” A sacred barrier materialized around the swarm of evil spirits led by I-Liv. Ancient sacred characters danced wildly, spewing a whirlwind of flames that incinerated the fleeing evil gods.

“Chi, gi, gi, gi, gi, gi...” That was their final groan.

“Y-you are...!” Realizing the boy’s true identity, Reys cried out. But the moment his gaze met the boy’s as he turned around... his breath nearly caught in his throat. Soft golden hair swayed, and his white skin resembled porcelain. He was the very embodiment of an angel from a sacred painting. Reys felt as if he were being sucked into those aqua-blue eyes. He couldn’t find his voice in that moment.

He formed the Holy Seal.

Rimuro let out a cheerful cry. “Wow! It’s a Holy War Officer!”

At the same time, cheers erupted from the crowd. Fleeing citizens stopped in their tracks and knelt. Soldiers lowered their gun barrels, savoring the moment.

Everyone bent their fingers and formed the sign.
Then, they bowed deeply to the boy. "It's the Holy Warrior… It's the Holy Warrior! Oh… how blessed we are…"
The boy smiled as well, displaying the Sign of the Creator God.

Holy War Officers... miracle-workers chosen by the Creator God. They are required to possess the concentration to activate the complex incantations for summoning, the strength to endure advanced and prolonged training, and above all, an unyielding faith.
The staff in the boy's hand was not merely a symbol of his rank. The rare gem Metalite, shining at its tip, is the catalyst that summons the power of the God of Creation, Aeolus.
A prodigy—one in tens of thousands—bestowed with the power of miracles.
That is what a Holy Warrior is. And that... was the boy standing right before them.
"Everyone, are you okay?!
"Are you hurt? Does anything hurt?" The boy turned to look at Rimuro and smiled.
"Yeah, Rimuro, I'm fine."
But the one who answered was the crimson Battle Armor Demon. "I'm the one who's not fine!" She yelled, standing up indignantly. The Battle Armor Demon, who had been shoved, was half-buried in mud. Her red hair and red cloak were both caked in black mud and her fists trembled with rage. "Huh? Riot, when… why did you fall there?"
"Because you shoved me!"
"Hmm, I don't remember that…"
Mud dripped from her head onto the ground. Grabbing the bewildered boy by the collar, the battle-armored demon… Riot's hands trembled.
"U-um, listen, what on earth are you—"
Waiting for the trembling to subside, Reys timidly stepped forward.
But Riot spun around with lightning speed.
"Forget the thanks—first, get us a bath!" She snapped, as if slapping him. "We'll talk later! My beauty's taking a serious hit here! Hurry up and show me the way!"
"O-okay…" In a thin voice, Reys took a step back.
But now it was the blond boy's turn. "This is Weimar City, right?"
"Yeah, that's right, you guys…"
"Yeah, we're here to help." The boy bowed and gave a small smile.
"My name is Justice, Holy War Officer. I heard that Weimar City was under siege by the Evil Spirits… so I just happened to be here. Nice to meet you." The boy… Holy War Officer Justice… extended his small hand.
Still stunned, Reys shook his hand. It was an unusually warm, gentle palm.

## 【Chapter 1: Weimar / Siege】

It is said that there were once eight continents on this planet, but a great cataclysm merged the eight continents into one, driving countless civilizations to ruin. It was an apocalypse known as the "Ancient Catastrophe." It was all the result of a rebellion against the Creator God, led by the Evil Spirit Emperor Lucifer.

Having banished the Creator God, the horde of evil spirits sought to annihilate the surviving human society as well. Two thousand years have passed since then. Humans and the horde of evil spirits have been waging a war of unknown duration, with each side fighting for survival.

Such is the story of the "New Continent".

And on that continent, there's an underground city called Weimar. The city's districts extended across twelve underground levels. Descending deeper, one passed through residential, commercial, and administrative districts, with industrial and power generation zones spreading further down. And the mining district, located at the very depths, reached 600 meters below ground.

Of course, Weimar was merely one city belonging to the city-state of Lebenburg. Yet for a city on the frontier, its urban infrastructure was truly unprecedented.

Not only Lebenburg, but other city-states in the Saxony region also cooperated in its construction. The Holy Church and the New Continent Crusade provided immense support in the form of both funds and manpower. Why here, on the frontier...?

Weimar is surrounded by the Igon Mountains, and trade routes are barely maintained through the Fulda and Hof gorges. In addition to the rugged terrain, the winters are long and harsh. Even during the day, the average temperature drops below minus forty degrees. Is such a harsh land really worth such a massive investment...?

But it is indeed worth it.

The Holy Steel, Zodanium.

This metal, imbued with sacred power, can be forged into a blade capable of slaying the Evil Spirits. It is the only resource capable of damaging them. The siege was a battle to defend the Zodanium mines. Moreover, Weimar's production volume and reserves were the largest in the Saxony region. Strategically, it was the most crucial stronghold.

That was why it was under siege by countless evil gods... until the day of extinction...

A warm shower pounded against her entire body.

(I'm finally here...) Feeling relieved, Riot washed the fatigue from her hair. She scrubbed away the battle grime caked onto her skin as if scraping it off.

(I wasn't sure how it would turn out... But I managed to make it before the fall...)

She was assigned a double room. The living quarters occupied the first through third underground levels. Among them, this was a particularly spacious room. The bathroom was large as well, and Riot let out a sigh of relief as she felt the warm water for the first time in a long while.

And then... she looked down at her naked form. At first glance, she was a sixteen-year-old girl - but all over her body, connection points were exposed. Plugs for connecting external electronic devices were also visible. If she activated combat

mode, she wouldn't even feel the warmth of the shower. On the contrary, she wouldn't flinch at scorching flames or freezing cold.
(But somehow, it's a relief... Is this feeling artificial too...?)
She rinsed her red hair with a rush of water.
It had been a long time since she'd felt this way.
(But whenever I see myself naked, that's what I think. Even though I know there's nothing I can do about it... I'm such an idiot, too...)
Riot wrapped a towel around her body and ran her fingers through her wet hair.
"Justice! Sorry to keep you waiting!" With that, she suddenly burst out of the bathroom. Instantly, a shrill scream, like silk being torn, echoed through the room.
"D-don't come out so suddenly! Riot!" The boy frantically pulled the towel tighter around himself. "I'm in the middle of changing right now!"
Looking around, Justice's sacred armor was hanging on the wall to dry. Apparently, the boy had just stripped down completely to dry his underwear, which had gotten wet from the cold air.
Riot looked down at her partner with a calm expression. "What's the matter... Since you went to the trouble of taking it off, you should've just joined me..."
"N-No way! Don't look at me!" The boy covered his lower body with the towel and turned his back to the wall. His entire face was bright red.
No wonder. Riot was baring herself down to her thighs. "Geez, what kind of outfit is that?!"
"It's fine, just after a bath..."
"Put some clothes on, Riot! I'm still a guy, you know!"
"Oh, right, that's true." She grinned and looked him up and down.
"I have to check every now and then, or I might forget."
"Do not forget! I'm a guy!"
"For a guy, you've got a pretty cute butt."
"Aaah, shut up! Get outta here!"
Riot laughed as she dodged the towel flying at her in protest. "Oh, come on. It's a blessing to be able to use a hot shower."
"Yeah, the water's fine." Justice nodded, having put on a spare sacred robe. But Riot shook her head.
"No, that's not it. There's only water. Since there's plenty of meltwater... That's why the reinforcements aren't worried!" She rubbed her wet hair with a towel. "Well, with all this snow, it's no wonder the advance is delayed. But still, couldn't they at least send a light-equipped unit ahead?"
"It can't be helped. The Pope's Regiment, our main hope, hasn't arrived yet. We can't win with just the Lebenburg Army."
Riot clicked her tongue. "The New World Crusaders are surprisingly slow to move, aren't they?"
Justice smiled silently. Though he was a wandering pilgrim, he was a Holy Officer still belonging to the New World Crusaders.
Composed of Holy Knights and Holy Officers, the New World Crusaders were the specialized combat unit for the war against the Demon Gods. They maintained Holy Churches throughout the land and were engaged in defending civilian life.

*“Don't look at me!”*
*Justice turned bright red all over and protested to Riot.*

However, the leaders known as the Twelve Popes possessed their own mobile strike force. That force was the Pope's Regiment, an elite unit composed of handpicked Holy Knights and Holy War Officers. The reinforcements for Weimar were waiting for the Pope's Regiment to arrive. But if they waited too long, the city would be in imminent danger of falling.

"I just couldn't wait… until the Pope's Regiment arrived…"

"I know. That's why I came." Riot recalled the events of a few days ago and ruffled her partner's blond hair. "Now that you're here, we're doing this, got it?"

"Yeah, I'll fight with everything I've got, just like always."

"No way!" She suddenly changed her tone and gave Justice a light tap on the head. Riot pouted in exasperation. "I'm telling you now. You can only use your miracle twice in a row! Got it?"

"Three times~" Muttering under his breath, Justice puckered his lips. "Isn't that my full power?"

"You know it's bad to use your full power… You know that, don't you? I'm saying this for your own good…"

"Yeah, thanks." The boy hung his head in silence.

Riot looked down at her partner with concern. How many times had she gone through this pain before? Even though she knew better, it was always the same cycle. That was just the kind of person Justice was...

(If only I could be the one...)

Even if she warned him, he wouldn't listen. Riot sighed at her stubborn partner. "Well, just be careful," she said, just as a corner of the wall began to ring.

The city-wide intercom installed in the room broke the two's silence.

"Yes, Riot listening."

"The Volunteer Army Commander is calling for you." The intercom announced this in a matter-of-fact tone. "Please come to the Joint Operations Headquarters in the Seventh Underground Level of the Administrative District. We'd like you to attend the regular meeting."

"I'll be right there." Riot replied just as matter-of-factly. As she returned the intercom to the wall, her expression suddenly shifted back to that of a Battle Armor Demon. "I've been summoned. It seems I'll get to meet him—the commander of Weimar… the Volunteer Army commander who's held out here all this time."

Justice nodded in agreement. The boy, too, had resumed his Holy War Officer's expression.

"Wow, this is huge...!"

As soon as the door opened, Justice let out a gasp of admiration.

The massive elevator connecting the ground level to the Twelfth Underground Level was large enough to transport even heavy vehicles. Its loud, clunky hum was grating, but it moved quickly.

Stepping off the elevator, the two set foot in the Seventh Underground Level, known as the Administrative District. Instantly, long, wide streets stretched out in all directions. On either side of the street, the departments overseeing Weimar's political administration stood in orderly rows.

“Well, even for a government district...” Placing her hands on her hips, Riot exhaled a puff of white breath. “It’s so bleak it really gets you down.” The lights were dimmed, and the street was dimly lit.

Even Riot, who could constantly regulate her body temperature, was surprised by the sensation of her breath freezing. Justice, too, had layered a winter coat over his sacred armor to withstand the biting cold.

The two soon arrived at the designated door.

“The regular meeting is about to begin. Please, come in.” The guards on either side saluted.

Joint Operations Headquarters… or so they called the large conference hall. Countless liaison officers had gathered in the spacious hall.

“Sixth Tier Command Post, scheduled report…”

“Second Engineer Squad, to Sector 46…”

“Captain Zedler, the main force is requesting your presence.”

Countless communication devices lined the rows of tables. Voices flew back and forth, filling the room with a buzz of activity. As they passed those tables…

“This—to the Third Supply Division, immediately!”

A young girl was issuing orders from the head of a round table. Her waist-length blonde hair shone with vitality, radiating a soft glow. Though her large blue eyes still held a touch of youthfulness, her profile was dignified and resolute. At the waist of her winter field uniform, adorned with a collar insignia, she carried a long sword—a symbol of her command.

“This is surplus supplies from the Fourth Underground Level. Tell them to redistribute them immediately... Also, can you check for available beds in the field hospital? We’ve got three cases of frostbite in Sector 12... Yes, please!” The girl was issuing orders to the officers around her, not caring if her blonde hair got tousled. The volunteer soldiers were also shouting into their portable communicators.

It was like a miniature command center.

(What the hell? There’s even a kid here...) Riot couldn’t help but mutter under her breath.

Everyone must be at the absolute limit of exhaustion – and yet there wasn’t a trace of weariness in the girl. On the contrary, just watching her made her feel energized. It had to be natural talent.

(So there are commanders that young, too.)

Just as she thought, Justice couldn’t help but marvel. “She’s… quite an amazing girl, isn’t she…” At the sound of his voice, all eyes turned toward them.

The officers noticed Justice’s sacred armor and were overwhelmed by Riot’s imposing presence. “That person… was here today…”

“Oh, the Holy War Officer and…”

Justice remained silent and bowed. Then the blonde girl suddenly looked up.

“Ah, I’ve been waiting for you!” The girl let her vibrant blonde hair dance around her shoulders and gripped Riott’s hand tightly.

“I am Roel, a gunner and commander of the Weimar Volunteer Corps. Thank you for coming to our aid.”

“W-wait, you’re the commander-in-chief of the Weimar Citizen Volunteer Corps?” Riot was astonished to the point of disbelief. “How old are you, anyway? You’re so young, yet so composed.”

"Oh, no," Roel said, looking flustered.

"I know it's surprising—I'm only thirteen. But I'm the only surviving council member... and my father used to serve as the council chairman."

"A council member? At that age?"

"Once you're past twelve, you're of working age... It would have been fine if my father were still alive, but he died in the recent attack... Well, I'm acting as his proxy."

Roel scratched her blonde hair, looking embarrassed. Yet she was the girl to whom twelve thousand desperate citizens had clung. A gunner in charge of city security, and a councilor far too young for the role. And on top of that, her father had been killed just a month ago. And yet, there wasn't a trace of despair in her.

(She's not just a thirteen-year-old.)
"To think you're the same age as me... I can't believe it."
At Justice's words, Roel's cheeks flushed slightly. "I'm sorry, I thought you were younger..."
"Please don't call me 'Lord'." Justice returned the greeting as usual. "I'm just a pilgrim. Saxony is my place of birth, and… well, I'm glad I made it in time."
The two faced each other and clasped hands. Both had blonde hair and blue eyes—typical Saxons. Just then, an officer standing nearby looked worriedly at Roel's profile. There was a certain resemblance between the two. It wasn't just that they were of the same ethnicity. An innocence naturally radiated from them. One could also sense a core strength.
"Lady Roel, your meal is ready..."
"I'll have it later. We have the regular meeting coming up, don't we?"
"But you haven't eaten a single meal since this morning. That's not good for your health..."
But Roel gave him a cheerful wink "You should eat when you can. If I can't, I'll just skip as many meals as I need to. It's not like everyone else is eating their fill, anyway."
Saying this, she brushed her bangs aside.
Riot looked at Roel with a sense of reassurance. "You're cut out for a siege. Just as I expected." Just then, a strange sound echoed from beside the Battle Armor Demon.
Justice, blushing, clutched his stomach and gave a sheepish smile. "Hehe, I guess I was hungry..."
"Well, what can you do? You're still growing..."
"Then, may I serve Lord Justice a meal..."
At Roel's words, Justice turned bright red. "I-it's okay, everyone else is holding out…"
"Oh, but..."
"That's right, holding back isn't good for your health."
At the sudden interruption Riot instinctively turned around.
"I'd heard that a Holy War Officer had come to lend a hand... but I never expected it to be a kid." A tall, massive figure stepped through the doorway. He brought the steaming cup to his lips and took a satisfying sip. Noticing the scent of the steam, Riot furrowed his brow.
"What's wrong with you? We're about to have a meeting, and you're drinking alcohol?"
"I'm drinking exactly because of that." Grinning, the man took another sip.
He scratched his closely cropped blond hair. The man, clearly accustomed to his white field uniform, leisurely lit a hand-rolled cigarette. He was a giant, standing nearly two meters tall.
Though confused, Roel forced a smile. "Um… let me introduce you all. This is Lord Justice."
"Just call me Justice."
"Okay, Justice… this is Bauser, a mercenary. He happened to be in town, so I asked him to join the citizen's militia."
"Nice to meet you, Justice."
"Uh, yeah… nice to meet you." Without delay, dropping the honorific, Bauser clasped the boy's small hand.

Riot grimaced at the mercenary, who was puffing on a cigarette. “He’s a big guy, but can we really count on him?”
Chuckling, “We’ll see,” Bauser took his seat.
Riot took another look at the man. Not only did he have a square jaw, but his neck was covered in countless scars. His field uniform was worn just enough to allow for freedom of movement. Not matter how you looked at him, he was a seasoned veteran of the battlefield. Seems trustworthy - whether he could be relied upon in a fight was another matter.
“Whoa, thanks for earlier.” This time, a very young voice rang out. A group of child soldiers appeared at the entrance. The boy at the front sniffled and turned his gaze toward Justice. “But even though you saved us, thanks to you guys showing up, we’ve got more mouths to feed now. I want you to really get that.”
“Reys! How can you say that?!” Roel stood up and grabbed the sleeve of the boy at the front - but the dark-skinned boy roughly shook her hand off.
“It’s true! Right now, we’d much rather have two cows than two extra soldiers!”
“You’ve got a way with words, don’t you?” Impressed, Bauser clapped his hands.
Riot frowned and looked down at the brazen-looking boy. “I wondered who it was—it’s just those brats from earlier. Honestly, kids these days have no manners at all.”
“Pfft, manners, my ass!” Fiddling with his earring, the young soldier snorted. “I, Lord Reys, am a man of some renown in the slums of Weimar! You’d be making a huge mistake if you thought I’d say ‘thank you’ just because you saved me!”
“That’s right, that’s right! Brother Reys is the Emperor of Weimar! A pretty famous savior!”
“Or rather, the best sniper in the Volunteer Army!”
Riot clutched her head at the shouting young soldier. “And you want us to work with guys like this?”
But Roel, his face pale, bowed his head to Justice. “I’m sorry, Justice! This kid… he’s the type who never even goes to church…”
“Ah, it’s fine with me. He’s right, after all.” Justice said with a smile.
That smile only added fuel to Reys’s anger.
“‘He’? Don’t you dare refer to me as just ‘he’!” Reys stepped closer to Justice and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him in close.
“Reys! That’s rude!”
“Shut up, Roel! Just because you’re a Holy War Officer doesn’t mean I’m going to cower in fear!” Naturally, the murmuring around them fell silent.
Roel panicked, her face turning pale.
“Lady Riot! Please stop!”
“Huh? Why?” Riot’s eyes darted around, taken aback by the sudden request.
But Roel’s voice was serious. “That kid is so violent! He’s always getting into fights! He never listens to a word I say either… And as for religious faith...”
But Riot sat back casually in his chair. “Oh, come on. A delinquent like him is no match for Lord Justice. Look...”
Indeed... Justice was smiling.
With an angelic smile, he gazed at Reys. “Oh, sorry. I thought you were younger than me. Forgive me if I’m wrong.”
“Forgive me, my ass! How old are you, anyway?!”

“Me? I’m thirteen. How about you?”
“T-twelve...”
“Huh,” Justice laughed in surprise.
“You look mature for your age, but you really are younger. You’re Reys, right? Nice to meet you.”
He grabbed Reys’s hands with both of his own and swung them around, grinning. As Reys stood there dumbfounded, his friends shouted encouragement.
“Bro, you’re getting a little outplayed here!”
“Or are you just scared because he’s older?”
“Don’t be an idiot!” Reys breaks free from the handshake and yells. But right in front of him, Justice is still grinning. Faced with that smile, Reys can’t help but stammer.
“A-anyway, it’s because the New Continent Crusaders lost that we’re going through all this trouble!”
“Oh, that’s right.”
“”That’s right”? Their job was to protect the town, yet they got wiped out in a flash! There were even ten Holy War Officers!”
“Yeah, I heard that too.”
“That’s why I don’t trust Holy War Officers, you know? They couldn’t win even with ten of them! So there’s no way you can win now, even if you’re here alone, right? Huh!”
“That’s right, that’s exactly what I’m saying!”
“Or rather, isn’t that just logical?”
But the Holy Warrior nodded without breaking his smile. “It’s true, just like Reys said.”
“Right? Even if you come alone, you won’t be much help!”
“Yeah, that’s definitely true. So, let’s fight together!” Once again, Justice took Raise’s hand. “You’re the best sniper in the Volunteer Army, right? Then lend me your strength! Let’s fight the Evil Spirits together until reinforcements arrive! If we join forces, we’ll definitely win!”
“Huh?” Reys was taken aback once more.
But undeterred, Justice kept holding his hand, still grinning.
The young soldiers stood there dumbfounded, their mouths agape.
“Wait a sec… what a weird Holy War Officer.”
“I mean, that guy is definitely crazy…”
Roel was dumbfounded, and Bauser gave a wry smile. “He’s quite the partner, Riot.” The mercenary took a loud sip of his drink. “What a ridiculous Holy Warrior. He’s even one step ahead of Reys.”
Riot just smiled silently.
Completely oblivious to their exchange, Justice’s smile grew even brighter.
“Nice to meet you, Reys!”
“Uh, yeah, nice to meet you… Wait, no! I’m not done talking yet!” Frustrated, Reys scratched his head repeatedly. “So, what I’m trying to say is...”
“Cut it out, Reys.” A deep, resonant voice silenced the room. “It’s time for the regular meeting. Save the small talk for later...”
At that voice, everyone turned around.
Justice involuntarily choked on his words.
Riot also stiffened on the spot.

The figure that appeared was a man who looked like a ghost. With long black hair hanging down his back, he surveyed the group with a pale face. Supporting his unsteady legs was a curved sword sheathed at his side.
His entire appearance was one that could be described as the very image of death.
“We’ll get started right away, Lord Hayate… By the way, these are…” Roel nodded and began to speak. But as if realizing something, the man immediately cut him off.
“I know—Justice the Holy Warrior and Riot the Armored Demon…”
“And you are…?” In response to Riot’s question, the man nodded.
“I am Hayate, a resident of the Land of Yamato. I serve as the strategist, so to speak, for the Volunteer Army. Starting tonight, I’d like you to participate in our military council as well...” Remaining expressionless, he bowed.
And so, the military council he had mentioned began.

The group gathered around a round table.
The liaison officers and Reys’s comrades had been asked to step aside. In their place, senior officers of the volunteer army and figures who appeared to be citizen representatives had entered the room.
(So this is a truly democratic city...) Riot was both surprised and impressed.
Although Weimar belongs to a city-state, it is granted autonomy and independence. That is how strategically important a city it is. The strategic resources produced by Weimar are distributed among numerous city-states, the Holy Church, and the New World Crusaders. If it were to come under the protection of any one power, causing an imbalance in distribution, a conflict would surely erupt. It could be said that the elected councilors held the very fate of the Saxon region in their hands.
“Sorry, but I’m going to take my leave as is…” Hayate alone lay down on the long chair that had been brought in. His movements were somewhat awkward. “It’s still hard for me to stand…”
“It’s no big deal.” Bauser leaned back sloppily in his chair and grinned magnanimously. “Just don’t fall asleep. It’s disrespectful.”
“I’m not some old man!” Reys fiddled with his earring. “Hayate is a proper samurai! He’s different from us, the oppressed class.”
“Pfft, don’t lump me in with you.”
“Let’s get along since we’re both of the so-called oppressed class.” Bauser scowled as if he found the idea utterly distasteful.
Hayate remained silent, ignoring the conversation.
(For someone so young...) Riot studied his profile. If not for the look of death about him, he would have been a handsome man. His face was pale, but his features were well-defined. His long eyelashes and melancholic expression gave him a cool, composed air. He was probably still in his thirties. Yet he had a strangely mature air about him, and yet still his profile was that of a young man.
“Quiet, everyone...” Roel clapped her hands and began the military council.
“First, let me introduce you. Holy War Officer Justice and Battle Armor Demon Riott, who have come to assist us... Starting today, both of you will be joining the regular council meetings.” Justice bowed deeply to those around him. Leaning back in her chair, Riot also gave a bow.

Roel nodded and turned back to the two of them. “So… I have a few things I’d like to ask you both. A few questions…”

“First, the reinforcements.” Hayate spoke up quickly. “We’ve been cut off from the outside world for some time now. It’s because the Dark Gods’ side has been intermittently jamming our communications. Because of that, we have absolutely no idea when the reinforcements will arrive.” His voice was urgent.

Everyone’s gaze turned to Justice and the others.

Then Hayate took a deep breath. “Whether it’s the Lebenburg Army or the New Continent Crusaders… when will reinforcements arrive, and how many troops will they bring? Unless we know that, we can’t plan for the siege ahead…!” As he spoke, Hayate coughed.

Nodding to Roel, who was watching him with concern, Justice stood up. “We’ll assume it will be another week.” He stated it clearly and decisively. “The Lebenburg Army has already arrived at the neighboring satellite city of Remazen with two divisions totaling 24,000 troops. As soon as the New Continent Crusade’s Papal Regiment arrives, they’re expected to advance this way.”

“Seriously, they’re taking their sweet time…” With a thud, Reys slammed his boot down on the round table. “Remazen isn’t even fifty kilometers from here. Even with this cold snap outside, it shouldn’t take more than two days if they hurry. They should just get a move on already.”

“Before you voice your opinion, take your foot off the table first!” The middle-aged officer shouted, veins bulging in his temples. “To break through the Demon God encirclement, elite units like the Papal Regiment are indispensable! Don’t you understand that?!”

Laughing it off, Reys turned his head away.

Soothing the officer, who was red-faced with rage, Roel looked at Justice once more. “So, the Papal Regiment will arrive in Remazen within a few days, then?”

“Yes. We’ve received word that they’ve already departed from their base in Germania.”

“Oh...!” The group let out a loud murmur. Their only hope lay in reinforcements. Hearing words that bolstered that hope, everyone cheered with joy. Everyone, that is, except Hayate...

“That’s a bit of a tight timeline...” The strategist tapped his chin thoughtfully.

Riot asked suspiciously. “What’s wrong? Are you worried about supplies?”

“Five days at most… We won’t last any longer than that.”

Justice’s mouth dropped open in surprise at Hayate’s matter-of-fact reply. “I-Is it really that bad?”

“To begin with, Weimar’s population is only about seventy thousand.” Roel spoke up instead. “But after the attack by the Demon Gods… currently, there are just under 12,000 people holed up inside. We need nearly 10 tons of wheat alone every day.”

Justice, who knew little about food self-sufficiency, was genuinely shocked. It was truly the end.

At that, Roel cleared his throat. “I’d like to get the women and children out somehow, but…”

“Exactly.” Hayate also began to speak in a heavy voice. “And then there are the seriously wounded. Using precious food rations on anyone other than combat personnel is a waste of supplies.”

“Is giving food to the wounded and children... a waste of supplies?” Justice’s expression hardened.

But paying no mind, Hayate nodded. “Abandon one to save another. If you can’t make that kind of calculation, bracing a siege is impossible.” As if asking if that wasn’t the case, he turned his gaze to the young Holy War Officer. Justice simply remained silent.

Riot, too, chose to say nothing.

Hayate’s opinion was a sound argument, befitting a military strategist. No battle is so easy that you can win without suffering any casualties.

“But food is still the better option.” Roel said with a brave smile. “The problem is fuel. Without heating, the sub-zero cold will seep in... and we’ll all freeze to death.”

Indeed, the fuel needed to heat the facilities on the twelfth underground level was the lifeline of this city. Before discussing strategy or tactics, they should have discussed supplies first.

“Well, we can’t exactly run away...” As if to ease the tension... sipping from a steaming cup, Bauser let out a bitter laugh. “We can’t surrender to the Evil Spirits. They’d slaughter us all... Besides, they’re not going to give up, are they?”

“Yeah, don’t count on it.” Roel nodded with an awkward smile. “As long as there’s a Zodanium mine underground, they won’t.”

If not for that, this siege would never have happened - but it was also precisely why Roel and the volunteer army had been able to hold out for a month. They mass-produced bullets using abundant Zodanium to repel the hordes of evil spirits. It was a tactic no other city could ever employ.

“That’s why they’re throwing so many evil spirits at us. It’s a never-ending onslaught.” Bauser scratched his chin as if in disgust.

Before his words had even finished, Riot slowly raised her hand. “That’s an illusion.” Riott spoke without standing up. “You’re trapped in the city, and every time you try to leave, you encounter an evil god. That’s why you’re under the illusion that the city’s perimeter is packed with them.”

“An illusion? That’s ridiculous!”

“Is that true?” Reys and Roel’s voices overlapped.

But Justice nodded firmly as well. “If there were that many evil spirits, there’d be no need for a siege. They’d break through the Holy Defense Array and destroy the mining facilities in one fell swoop. The fact that they don’t… means there are limits to the evil spirits’ combat power.” Justice’s voice already carried the authority of an expert in exterminating evil spirits.

Riot continued in a calm voice. “The evil spirits… are monitoring you. If you try to escape, they’ll concentrate their forces there. That’s why you keep getting hit over and over… That’s why we also encountered the evil spirits on the outskirts of the city. But once we broke through, they only pursued us once. The enemy didn’t have the reserves to attack us that many times.”

The table gasped at those words.

“The evil gods’ forces are limited...” Roel regurgitated the boy’s words. “Which means we...”

“Yes. We have a chance to win.” Justice declared firmly.

"They must be exhausted. If we hold out, reinforcements will surely arrive. At that point, we will definitely be able to launch a pincer attack on the Demon God forces from both inside and outside the city. That will be the moment of victory...!"

The group pondered the Holy War Officer's words.

Roel nodded vigorously, then slowly turned to face the Strategist. "...What are your thoughts, Lord Hayate?"

The military strategist bowed his head and interlaced his fingers, then eventually addressed Riott. "With their initial surprise attack, the enemy annihilated our triple defensive lines. Entirely, including one of our defensive divisions......"

Recalling the horror, the room fell silent. "Not only the ten thousand soldiers, but all ten Holy War Officers were frozen to death along with their positions. A Demon God or a Blood Pact member capable of wielding that level of magic must be in command. How do we deal with that threat?"

"We won't know until we fight them directly, but…" Riot spoke bluntly. "That kind of powerful magic isn't something they can use over and over again. The fact that they didn't use it a second time is proof of that, right? To think the boss is also exhausted... is that too naïve of me?"

Hayate closed his eyes and pondered. "There's also the possibility that the enemy is conserving their strength. Until the very last moment before reinforcements arrive for us..." That, too, was a calm assessment.

But Bauser laughed and cut him off. "Nah, that's unlikely." He pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket. "Once a day has passed, reinforcements will be approaching Weimar. The enemy can't afford to waste time. The Evil Spirits will definitely concentrate his attacks over the next few days."

Roel turned to the military strategist, seeking his agreement. "Lord Hayate…?"

"I see... In any case, it means the decisive battle is near... In that case, let's mobilize another 600 men." Hayate opened his eyes and made an immediate decision. "Currently, the volunteer army has about 1,200 troops... but we'll increase that to 1,800 and reorganize. Mobilizing any more than that would hinder our rear operations. Gather everyone who thinks they can handle a gun by tomorrow. We'll start reorganizing immediately."

With that, a middle-aged man stood up - judging by his attire, he appeared to be a city administrator. "Almost all young men are already serving in the military. If we're going to mobilize any more, we'll have to raise or lower the draft age..."

"We'll have to do both. Otherwise, we won't be able to gather six hundred men." Hayate sighed and looked up at the commander.

Roel smiled and pointed at Justice and Riot. "Fortunately, we've received some reassuring reinforcements. These two should be the decisive factor in our counterattack. If we convey that, wouldn't everyone's morale rise, Public Relations Officer?"

The young administrative officer stood up and nodded. "I'll use that to mobilize the troops. Leave it to me."

Roel scanned the group and cleared her throat. "We are certainly at a disadvantage. But we haven't lost yet. We have a few more days until reinforcements arrive. Let's hold out until then...!"

“If reinforcements are coming, we have no choice but to keep fighting—” Roel gave Reys a faint smile. “Our city supplies Zodanium weapons to all of Saxon. Don’t forget that.”

“If this place falls, all of Saxon will be exposed to the threat of the Evil Spirits… We cannot afford to lose.” At Hayate’s words, everyone silently agreed.

Riot was honestly amazed by their high morale. (No wonder they managed to hold out for a whole month...) She exchanged a silent glance with Justice.

The boy, too, was smiling happily as he witnessed their strong unity.

“I’ll report on the supply situation later.” Roel signaled for the meeting to adjourn. “Lord Hayate, please begin reviewing the defense sectors. We’ll complete the reorganization by tomorrow night. Until then, everyone, return to your respective units and maintain vigilance. That’s all!”

“Well, well, things are about to get busy.” Bauser stood up and stretched. “I suppose I’ll try to get some good sleep, at least tonight.”

Riot silently looked down at her hands. Her surging fighting spirit was channeled into her fists; she couldn’t put it into words.

“O Lord... O Great Frozen Phallus... Grant that a new offspring may dwell within my womb... Grant me... a new seed... within my womb…”

Facing the pitch-black darkness, the man spoke. A monotone resonance. A rough, raspy voice. At that accursed prayer, the darkness trembled.

From the depths of the underworld, a voice of ecstasy welled up.

“Eg… ngai-Veil... Eg... Reg... Ngai-Veil…” At the voice that shook the darkness, the man closed his eyes in rapture.

“Oh, great Lord Ngai-Veil... Hurry and embrace me... Hurry and impregnate me…” The man threw himself into the pitch-black darkness. The swirling darkness enveloped his naked form. Now it was the man’s turn to cry out.

“Ah... This is a moment of bliss... I can’t stand it... My Lord, I... I swear to be your wife for the rest of my life... Ah...... My Lord...... My husband...”

Under the caresses of the darkness, the man writhed in ecstasy. His entire body was enveloped in a numbing pleasure. Suddenly, the man’s belly swelled abnormally.

The man writhed with delight, stroking his lower abdomen. “Come forth... my bastard child... Hold nothing back... tear open my belly…”

In response, a muffled scream was heard.

Suddenly, a black arm burst through his abdomen - yet the man’s expression of joy remained unchanged. He simply continued to wear a look of pure ecstasy. Gripping the seven-fingered arm that had burst forth, the man smiled contentedly.

“Have you been born, my new bastard child…?” Rubbing his belly, the man spoke. “The Holy War Officers have entered the city of Weimar… It seems those insolent volunteers are continuing to hold out…”

Something screamed inside his belly with a grinding sound. With a look of delight, the man narrowed his eyes. “Don’t worry, I’m going too... For the great Lord Ngai-Veil...” The man embraced the pitch-black darkness and closed his eyes.

“Let us pluck away the budding hope...”

"Summon the Holy Defense Array..."
Justice opened his eyes and tapped the floor with his Holy War Staff. Holy light spread out silently. The ripples of light gradually transformed into a sequence of ancient sacred characters.
"Phew..." The blond-haired boy wiped the sweat from his forehead. The Holy Defense Array was already drawn on the floor of the fuel storage room. But glancing back at Hayate, Justice wore a weary expression.
"Actually, defensive miracles are more effective. They can also serve as offensive barriers... but I can't manage to attach defensive miracles to all of this..." The boy was pointing at a 3D map of the Weimar underground. Hayate had scrawled countless red notes all over it. Since morning, Justice had been going from place to place, continuously summoning Holy Defense Circles. Unlike Miracles, Holy Defense Circles—which even ordinary priests and paladins could draw—were the most versatile defense against magic.
"The defensive miracles I know have a limited duration. In that regard, Holy Defense Circles are semi-permanent… but I can only manage about ten locations a day."
"We'll have you do it anyway. If we can preserve the Holy Defense Circles that were already in place, a war of attrition will become nothing more than a theoretical concept."
Nodding, the boy returned his gaze to the map. The red markers identified only the critical strongholds essential for the siege, such as mining facilities and water treatment plants. Additionally, there were the underground arteries connecting these key points. Residential areas, it seemed, had already been abandoned.
"If you try to protect everything, you'll end up losing everything… I believe that was an old Saxon proverb."
"Yes, that's right."
"Until now, we'd been using the comfortable residential areas for the elderly and the seriously wounded... but we no longer have that luxury. Everyone must now know the hardships of the siege equally... and simply endure."
"It really is a war, isn't it..." Justice let out a deep sigh.
Behind him...
"Hey, are you really planning to eat this?" Riot roughly unloaded the cargo from the cliff. What she tossed down was a broken wooden chair. In front of them, scrap wood from the walls and torn-up floorboards were piled up like a mountain.
"We're not eating this as is." Hayate said, picking up one of the chair's legs. "We'll scrape off the painted surface and grind down the inner part until it's like sawdust. Then mix it with breadcrumbs. The ratio is two to one."
"Yuck!" The Battle Armor Demon grimaced at the recipe for substitute bread. "Even if sawdust is fibrous, I don't feel like eating that at all..."
"But that saves thirty percent on breadcrumbs." The boy smiled as he picked up a scrap of wood. "Simple food is good for you. Luxury is the enemy."
"No, it isn't. Luxury is wonderful."
Citizens were busy shaving the wooden items delivered early that morning into sawdust. Even though it was a fuel depot, the refugees had packed in so tightly there wasn't a single empty space.

“We’ll have to limit the areas we heat. If we combine the places we need to protect with the people we need to protect, we’ll be able to save that much more.” Hayate, his face pale, moved forward with his sword as a pillow. “Our first priorities are securing new food supplies and conserving fuel. Until we eliminate those concerns, the citizens won’t be able to rest easy.”

“You’re quite the resourceful strategist.”

“I’m merely holding on.” Hayate lowered his gaze at Riot’s praise. “It’s a last-ditch measure. If we cross that line, the siege itself will be in jeopardy...” Hayate clicked his tongue in frustration.

It was indeed a dangerous strategy. The food storage, fuel depot, ammunition factory, and water supply facilities. The refugees had been gathered in places where the Demon Gods was most likely to strike. If a battle broke out there, there would inevitably be collateral damage. Knowing this, he was still pushing forward with the plan.

Riot sensed his reluctance. “It can’t be helped... It’s the best option under the circumstances.”

“There’s no other choice... Reys should have finished gathering food by now. Let’s check on the situation.” Saying this, Hayate opened the door to the fuel depot, but the sheer weight of it made him stagger.

“Oh... Let me help.” As she spoke, Riot reached out to support the Strategist. But at that very moment, she stopped short, and the Battle Armor Demon’s lips tightened. “Y-you… you’re not sick, are you…?”

Riot’s hand was resting on the Strategist’s arm. Seeing her face stiffen, Justice’s expression hardened as well. “Lord H-Hayate…?”

“...There’s no need to be surprised.” Stopping in his tracks, Hayate leaned against the wall of the passageway. The Strategist rolled up his sleeves in front of the two of them. The two stared intently at the Strategist’s arm.

Hayate’s right arm was covered in several black sores. They looked almost like pus.

“Hayate, the magic...”

“Yes, it’s eating away at my body...” Hayate said in a calm voice. “I served as an exterminator of evil spirits in Yamato. But I was ambushed... I don’t have much time left.”

“But why did you come here?”

“I lost all my subordinates; I was the only one left alive. I set out on a journey to find a place to die... and that’s how I ended up here.” Pulling his sleeve back into place, Hayate exhaled a white breath.

“But can you fight in that condition?”

“As long as I have this...” Hayate held out the sword he’d been using as a pillow. “In Yamato... we call it a katana. Its name is ‘Seima.’ In Yamato, it means ‘demon seal’”

“So this is... a katana...” Justice started to speak, then fell silent.

Riot felt the same way. If what Hayate said was true, this sword chose its wielder. Though it was made of Zodanium, it wasn’t something just anyone could swing. It was a sword that bestowed miracles upon its wielder.

It could be called a mythical weapon.

Riot lent her shoulder to Hayate once more. “But they say the Katana chips away at the wielder’s lifespan. You’d better take care of your own life, too.”
“I know...” His cool gaze trembled ever so slightly.
The three of them began to slowly ascend the freezing corridor toward the upper floors.
“Hey, big bro Reys, I’m getting a little tired.”
“Stop whining! Our work isn’t done yet!” Their bickering echoed all the way downstairs.
The Battle Armor Demon supported Hayate as they made their way up the stairs.
The walls of the corridor should have been concrete, but they’d been smashed to pieces with drills and hammers, leaving the bare earth exposed. The chill seeping from the earth caused the temperature in the passageway to drop sharply.
“It’s cold, isn’t it? Put this on.”
“Sorry about that...” Riot draped her coat over Hayate and walked over to the group of young soldiers.
“Are you guys doing your jobs properly?”
“It’s Riot...”
“Hey, everyone, say hello!” The young soldiers bowed their heads respectfully.
Riot was taken aback by the strange treatment. “Who’s the big shot here, anyway? Who?! And look at what you’ve dug up...”
A large hole had been dug into the ground. Its depth might have reached ten meters.
“Hey, hey, do you think there’s any food down here in the dirt?” Justice also squinted his eyes in curiosity. Just then, a black shadow leapt out from inside the hole.
“U-uh, whoa!”
“Don’t be so surprised! Am I some kind of demon god or something?!” His white field uniform now caked in mud, Reys bared his teeth. He was carrying buckets in both hands.
“Oh, it’s just you, Reys. You scared me.”
“What do you mean, ‘Oh, it’s just you’? I’m doing manual labor here! You should help out a little too!”
“You’ve got mud on the tip of your nose.”
“Pfft… Just wipe it off, already.”
Obeying his command, Justice wiped the dirt off with his sleeve.
The Battle Armor Demon watched the two of them with a smile on her face. “So, how’s it going, Reys? Any results?”
“Heh heh heh…... Here, take look for yourself!” With a malicious look on his face, Reys grabbed the prey out of the bucket. Then, he quickly shoved it right under Riot’s nose.
In her hand, a plump, bluish-black amphibian was thrashing about. “Guh, guh,” came a pitiful groan.
“What is this? It’s just a common bullfrog.” Flicking its plump belly with her fingertip, Riot shrugged her shoulders in boredom. “I thought there’d be something tastier. I guess I got my hopes up for nothing.”
“...You’re not exactly cute.” Exasperated, Reys looked disappointed.
Hayate gave him a light tap on the shoulder. “They’re storing up nutrients for hibernation this time of year. You just have to dig a little, and you’ll find them right away. Good job, Reys.”

Reys nodded happily at the strategist, who was satisfied with the hunt. “Leave this kind of thing to me. I’ll catch you thousands of them. The taste is, well, about as bad as chicken, but... It’s a Saxon specialty, after all.”

“Oh, really?” said Riot, turning to look at her partner. “You’re Saxon too, aren’t you? Does it remind you of home?”

But Justice wasn’t behind her - he was more than ten meters down the hallway, cowering on the ground, his face contorted with fear.

“I just… can’t stand that stuff.” His voice trembling with embarrassment, Justice’s eyes welled up with tears. “When I was a kid, I saw them being skinned it and got scared. Haven’t been able to eat any since.”

“You’re still a kid!”

“What a pathetic Holy War Officer, seriously!”

Riot and Reys spoke in unison, dumbfounded. Hayate was desperately trying to stifle his laughter. Just then, the military strategist’s hip-mounted communicator rang out. “It’s me. Is something wrong?”

“This is Roel. The new combat personnel have arrived.”

The voice was audible to Riot and the others as well.
"Please come to the multipurpose hall on the eighth level of the administrative district. We need to reorganize the units."
"Roger that. We're on our way." Wiping the smile from his face, the strategist turned back to Riot. "Come with me. I hear the new recruits are waiting. There aren't many people I can trust with them..."
"Got it... Justice?" When she turned around, the young Holy War Officer was looking like he was about to cry.
"I'll help out over here~" Trying his best to look away from the contents, Justice held a bucket belonging to Putaegel. "Take this to the food storage~ Don't worry about me, just go~"
"Hold it steady! Ugh, you wimp!" Sniffling, cursing, and scolding, the young soldiers made their way down the hallway.
Watching their backs, Hayate smiled. "His Holiness the Holy Officer… he's just like a child… He's the only one we can rely on, though…"
"You'll change your mind once you see him fight." Riot tossed her red hair back and laughed. "That boy turns despair into hope. That's just the kind of kid he is."
"I see. Let's keep our hopes up." The Strategist fixed a steely gaze on Riot. "I'll have him turn it around as many times as it takes. Until we win." With that, the Strategist stepped out into the corridor.
The noise of the boys faded into the distance as they moved further down the hall.

(Are we really going to fight side by side with these guys...?) Riot couldn't hide her disappointment.
The only ones lining up in the multipurpose hall were the elderly and children. Even the wounded were standing in line. One after another, they received their military uniforms. Most of them had probably never even held a gun before. When faced with a Demon God, would they really be able to pull the trigger? Riot pondered on that.
"You look worried, Riot."
As she spoke, Roel approached. As Commander-in-Chief, she strode past the new recruits with a dignified expression. Seeing her confident stride, Riot grimaced in exasperation.
"Anyone would be worried. There really isn't a single decent person here."
"We ran out of decent human resources a long time ago. All we have to rely on is their fighting spirit." With that, Roel held out a piece of paper.
The Battle Armor Demon cast her eyes over the battle formation.

'Volunteer Army Headquarters Company: Strength 100
Commander: Roel, Chief of Staff: Hayate

1st Combat Battalion: Battalion Commander: Bauser
2nd Combat Battalion: Battalion Commander: Beeke
3rd Combat Battalion: Battalion Commander Künmel
4th Combat Battalion: Battalion Commander Neering

Each combat battalion (400-man strength) is organized into three combat companies (120-man strength each)

Each combat company: 84 rifles
36 submachine guns
9 light machine guns
9 multi-purpose rocket launchers”

“The allocation of new recruits is already complete.” Stepping forward, Hayate began explaining from the side. “The Second through Fourth Battalions will take up perimeter security starting tonight. Since there’s no time for training... I’ve filled them with veteran non-commissioned officers.”
“Hmm... So, what about the First Battalion?”
“I deliberately gathered the new recruits.” The strategist pointed to a group of recruits. “But the First Battalion will serve as the decisive strike force. If the enemy still has reserves, it would be unwise to exhaust all our units. We’ll preserve them and use them as reserve forces.”
“I wonder if that’ll work?” Scratching the back of her neck, Riot squirmed. “You’re making a unit full of rookies into a mobile reserve? And as a decisive battle force, no less? Commander Bauser seems to have plenty of experience, though...”
“Me?”
“That’s why you were called here. Don’t you get it?” Riot was taken aback by Hayate’s sudden nomination. Roel then gave her a light tap on the shoulder.
“Please. I think the new recruits will feel reassured if you’re with them, Riot. After all... you have plenty of combat experience, don’t you?”
“So you want me to assist the First Battalion... do keep in mind, my training methods are pretty rough.”
“Do as you please,” Roel smiled. “Bauser is already meeting with the new recruits. I’ll leave the rest to the two of you.”
“The two of us, huh…”
“We’re counting on you,” Hayate said, patting her on the shoulder as well. As the commander and the strategist walked away together, Riot also made her way diagonally across the multipurpose hall.
Then, suddenly, she let out a scream. “What’s this, Bauser! You’re not slacking off, are you?!”
“Me, slacking off? How rude—to the First Battalion Commander, no less.”
“But you’re drinking again!”
“If I didn’t drink, my parents would be happy, wouldn’t they?” The mercenary, clutching a cup of alcohol, was sprawled out on the floor. The new recruits were lined up in front of him, looking confused as to what to do.
Riot, utterly exasperated, scratched her head. “Listen, I’m the First Battalion’s assistant commander, too! If you act like this, it’s going to kill my motivation!”
“Don’t get so worked up. We haven’t even finished handing out the uniforms yet. We’ve got time for a drink, don’t we?”
“Seriously… “Where on earth did you scrounge this from in the middle of a food shortage?!”

“The booze just walked right up to me on its own. How nice of it, ey?”
As Riot stood speechless, an officer approached from behind.
“Excuse me, Riott... I am Kruger, serving as adjutant to Battalion Commander Bowser.”
“Ah, nice to meet you... .”
“The distribution of uniforms will be completed shortly. The battalion commander would like you to offer a few words of encouragement to the new recruits...”
“Words of encouragement..?” Riot glared at the earnest-looking aide. Kruger couldn’t hide his confusion either.
“Listen, you should know who you’re talking to. You’re wrong to expect any courtesy from me.”
“That may be true, but…”
“If you’re going to do that, do it when I’m sober. That is, if I ever am.”
As they spoke, other battalions marched past one after another. With stern commands and the rhythmic clatter of their boots, they returned to their respective units.
Not only the new recruits, but even the commanders of other battalions were staring wide-eyed at the First Battalion.
And then, suddenly... “Bauser! Is this the time to be sleeping?!” A middle-aged officer screamed, veins bulging in his temples.
Riot recognized that expression - it was the same officer who had flown into a rage at Reys during yesterday’s regular meeting.
Bauser opened his eyes, looking bored. “What is it, Commander Künmel?”
“Don’t give me a ‘what is it’! Your First Battalion is full of recruits, isn’t it! Teach them the basics of marching and get them into training right away!”
“We’re skipping the marching. We’re going straight to field training. Don’t worry about it.”
“Don’t worry about it, huh?!”
Riot stifled a burst of laughter. Even if they’re short on manpower, he’s one stiff-necked battalion commander. It was hard not to laugh.
“Battalion Commander Bauser is about to give some words of encouragement, so, Battalion Commander Künmel—” Riot put on a smooth smile. “I intend to drill the belief in certain victory into the recruits. Please don’t worry.”
“Hmph, watch it, Strike Force!” Künmel stormed off, steam practically rising from his head.
Watching him go, Riot turned back to her superior with a wry smile. “Now then, it’s about time you got your heavy ass up. Otherwise, the new recruits will get anxious.”
“If you say so...” He stretched widely and let out a yawn. Finally standing up, Bowser approached the recruits, cup still in hand, and surveyed the group with a scowling gaze. “I had my suspicions, but this batallion really is nothing but brats and old geezers. Not a single decent soul among you.”
“Maybe they’re better-looking than you.”
“Not a single one of them is as handsome as me. And...” Suddenly, his gaze came to a halt.
Bowser abruptly beckoned to one of the young soldiers.
“Hey, you, come here, come here…”
“Y-yes, sir?”

“That’s right. Come on over.” As soon as he summoned him, he gave him a thorough once-over.
“Are you from this town?”
“No, I’m a traveling merchant who just happened to be passing through…”
“No wonder your boots are too small. Change them right away.” The mercenary grinned and pointed at his feet. “Meltwater is seeping into the camp. Your boots will get wet in no time. Cut up a blanket and make some socks. Then put on a pair that’s one size bigger. Otherwise, your circulation will suffer.”
With a practiced eye, he inspected his attire. “Nail studs to the soles of your boots. The combat corridors are frozen solid since the heating’s out. It’ll keep you from slipping. You should pick up some scraps of paper and stuff them between your field uniform and your underwear. It’ll help keep the cold at bay.”
“Y-yes...” The young soldier listened intently to the instructions being handed down one after another.
“When it comes to staying warm, the locals should know best. After all, they’ve been enduring this cold for years. Make sure you ask the old folks around here.” Smiling, the mercenary looked out over the new recruits. “Anyway, prepare for the cold. If you freeze to death before you even get to fight, it’s all over. Got it?”
“Sir,” an elderly soldier called out. “In that case, would it be all right if I had some rye liquor? It warms you right down to your bones, you know.”
“Saxon vodka, huh? Of course, go ahead. I’m drinking it myself.” Saying this, he took a swig from his cup. “Just don’t drink too much. Riot’s a pain in the neck.”
“Bauser!”
Laughter drowned out the protest. In an instant, smiles spread across the recruits’ faces.
(He’s actually… pretty good.) Riot was impressed. She hadn’t seen Bowser in battle yet, but in a single moment, he’d managed to dispel the recruits’ anxiety. To be trusted by his soldiers, and to trust them in return—that was the mark of a good commander.
“Well then, let’s go, Riot. We’ve got to teach these guys how to hold a gun.”
“Got it, Battalion Commander.” Riot gave a playful salute.
But it wasn’t just a perfunctory gesture - there is no distinction between day and night in the underground city of Weimar. No sunlight penetrates, and no breeze can be felt. But as midnight approaches, the figures passing through the corridors cease, and even the faintest lighting fades away.

Feeling the night’s chill, Justice exhaled a white breath into the air.
“It really is cold at night, isn’t it...”
“Ugh, making us work this late at night!” With a weary voice, Reys collapsed onto the corridor floor. “They made us do this heavy labor on just a single piece of bread since this morning! I want tomorrow off!”
“Totally, totally. I’m starving!”
“Actually, our next assignment is different.” The boys, clutching their flashlights, finally crawled out of the dark food storage room. They didn’t even have the strength to shine the light on each other’s faces, and one after another, they slumped down in the hallway.

Having finished unloading the supplies from the pantry, Justice seemed exhausted as well. He sat down in a corner of the hallway, hugging his knees and curling up into a small ball. “Guys, it’s getting late. I know you’re tired, but… you have to go back to our families.”
“Pfft, like we have families to go back to. We’re just foundlings from the slums!” Reys spat out the words, and everyone nodded in unison.
“That’s right, that’s right. We lead lonely lives...”
“I mean, what even is a family?” The boy soldiers let out weary laughter.
But Justice fixed his gaze directly on Reys.
“Reys, you… you don’t have parents, do you…”
“I don’t even know what they look like. Well, they probably just dumped me to lighten the load anyway.” The young soldier crossed his legs and gave Justice a weary look. “Everyone in my squad’s like that. Maybe it’s because we had a rough upbringing, but a lot of us are tough. That’s why we’re still alive.”
“Sorry my hands are a bit dirty. I’m Deff.” A chubby, freckled young soldier held out his hand. Justice smiled and shook his hand.
“Def, nice to meet you. And you are...”
“Jam. Or rather, is this our first proper greeting?” He shook hands with another boy, also of Afro-descendant appearance, who was wearing sunglasses. Justice learned the names of all of Reys’s companions.
“We all used to work at the Zodanium Mine. That’s the only thing around here, so…”
“Wow, that’s impressive.”
“You bet! We were made to work sixteen hours a day, non-stop. And for peanuts, too.”
“Yeah, yeah, in those dark tunnels.”
“Honestly, I’m sick of that job.”
Spurred by Def and Jam, the child soldiers voiced their grievances.
But the Holy War Officer said in a sympathetic tone, “Still, you’re all doing your best to protect this town. You really are amazing.”
“What choice do we have? It’s the town we were born in.” Reys laughed bitterly. “Things are like this now... but Weimar used to be a pretty nice town, you know.”
“Yeah, the pastries at the shop on Main Street were delicious.”
“I wish we could play in Fourth Park again.”
“And the used motorcycle shop burned down, too.”
The nostalgic talk of the past never seemed to end.
Justice smiled faintly in the shadows. “...None of you have reached conscription age yet. But I think it’s admirable that you volunteered to fight.”
“That’s not true. You’re just overthinking it.”
“Yeah, and you just got here yesterday. Don’t act like you know everything.”
Laughter erupted again — friendly laughter.
Even so, Justice kept smiling. He just stood there silently, staring straight at Reys. Perhaps feeling embarrassed, Reys ran his fingers through his hair again.
“It’s just… I can’t stand that my town was destroyed by the Demon Gods. A lot of my friends got killed, too. I’ve got to avenge them, at the very least.”
“You’re already avenging them, big bro.”
“I mean, you’re a master sniper, after all.”
Hearing his comrades’ words, Reys puffed out his chest.

"Well, yeah. No evil god has ever managed to escape me! I've got 100% accuracy!"
Justice watched the young soldiers chatting like this with a look of envy.
Just then, the sound of heavy footsteps approached. At the same time, a bright flashlight beam was shone in their direction.
"Justice... is that you?"
"Huh? Riot?" The boys lowered their eyes at the sudden light, but Justice stood up and recognized his partner's figure in the darkness.
"What's up? Did you come to pick me up?"
"Silly, that's not it. I'm on my way back from giving basic training."
Riot gave Justice a gentle tap on the forehead.
Instantly, cheers erupted from the young soldiers.
"Yo-yo, came to pick up her Holy War Officer from kindergarten!"
"You two are so close! It's so annoying!"
"N-no, that's not it at all!" Justice turned bright red and swung his Holy War sword around. The young soldiers laughed and scattered.
Riot was dumbfounded and fought off a wave of dizziness. "You guys should head home soon, too. Rimuro's been waiting forever."
"Oh crap, I forgot!"
"That kid gets really annoying when we're late!"
"I mean, she's only six, but she's so sassy!" In the blink of an eye, they slung their gear over their shoulders and dashed down the hallway.
"See ya, Justice! See you tomorrow!"
"Take good care of your princess!"
"Ugh! Reys! Everyone!" They disappeared amid laughter.
Only the two of them remained behind. "They were all in such a hurry, weren't they?"
"That's just how worried they are about Rimuro. I heard that kid was abandoned by her parents too..."
"Is that so..." Instantly, Justice's expression clouded over.
Riot patted her partner on the shoulder. "You must be hungry too. I've got a special late-night snack for us."
"Yeah, but I've got something I need to do..."
"What on earth could you be doing in the middle of the night..."
"I've got to draw the Sacred Defense Array..." Justice pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. It was the defense plan for the underground city that Hayate had drawn up. "I haven't finished them all yet, as I was told to. It's better to get it done as soon as possible... so I'll go draw it by myself."
"I'm worried about you going alone. I'll come with you."
"It's fine, I'll be okay on my own." Saying that, Justice smiled. "You should rest, Riot. You haven't adjusted the settings for cold climates yet, have you?"
"Yeah, well... but..."
"This is my job. You just stay ready to fight at any moment, Riot."
Riot smiled and nodded. "I guess I have no choice. Be back in two hours. We've got an early start tomorrow."
"Yeah, I know."
"Let me know if anything happens, okay?"
"You're such a worrier, Riot."

Still smiling, he ran off. He must be tired... Where does all that energy come from in that tiny body of his...
(A worrier, huh...) Riot gave a wry smile at her partner's words. (He's right, though, so I guess there's nothing I can do about it...) She began to slowly make her way back down the passageway she had come through.
It was a long, sloping passageway connecting the Power Generation District to the upper Industrial District. There were no people in sight, and no light.
(Someday, Justice will grow up too... I wonder what I'll be doing by then... Will we still be traveling together by then..?)
She found herself thinking this from time to time. Wishing for the journey to end, yet letting her thoughts wander to what lay beyond... She passed through the oil-stained corridors of the Industrial District and continued ascending toward the Administrative District. Even so, her thoughts would not fade.
(I want to end that child's journey as soon as possible. But after that, what will I do… Where will I go......)
It had been a journey of less than two years. But it felt as though it would go on forever. I wanted to end this journey peacefully, at the very least. Just as Riot was wishing for that...
(Wait...)
Suddenly, a light appeared at the end of the passageway.
The door to a small conference room was open, and a faint glow of light was spilling out. Riot stopped and peered inside, finding herself staring at the scene within for a moment.
"Um... we've already finished evacuating this district... so relocating the people from this district... I see, this is the only place left..." Countless maps and documents were scattered across the round table in the conference room. A single girl was desperately struggling amidst that chaotic whirlwind of paper.
"You're really working hard, Roel…"
"Eek, you scared me!" Startled by the voice, the girl—the commander—jolted and turned toward her. Chuckling softly, Riot stepped into the conference room.
"I heard you talking to yourself, so I just had to…"
"Oh, come on, don't scare me like that!"
"Sorry, I guess I interrupted you."
"No, I was just about to go to sleep anyway." Saying that, she began gathering the papers.
Riot's gaze fell on the teapot set placed at the edge of the round table.
"There's some Shiron tea here. I'll brew some right now."
"No, I should…—"
"It's fine. Even a Battle Armor Demon can brew a cup of tea."
"I'm s-sorry…—" Soon, the sweet aroma of Shiron tea leaves wafted through the conference room late at night. The two of them sipped from their steaming cups and smiled at each other naturally.
"It must be tough for you, Commander..."
"Yes, it is. I've left the defense plans to Lord Hayate, but... the evacuation from the residential districts isn't progressing very well."

“Well, they’re being evacuated to the Power Generation District and the Industrial District, after all.”
“I think it must be hard on the elderly and the wounded...”
“But we have to do it, don’t we?”
“Of course. Otherwise, we can’t win.” She smiled and stated it firmly.
At those powerful words, Riot’s expression softened. “You’re so dependable. I’m truly impressed…”
“May I ask you something?” Suddenly, Roel set down her cup. From behind the steam, the girl cast a hesitant glance.
Riot nodded casually. “Go ahead. What is it...?”
“Why did you come here?” She asked that only now. “I asked Justice. I asked why you came here even though you’re in the middle of your pilgrimage...”
“And what did he say?”
“He said… because he wanted to. He said he couldn’t just leave me behind.”
“That’s right,” Riot said, setting down her cup as well. “I’m just tagging along on his journey. Since Justice said he was going, I came too. That’s all there is to it.”
“But why go to such lenghts…?”
“Well, you see…” As she spoke, Riot ran a hand through her bangs. “That’s just Justice for you. I don’t really want to go into a long explanation, but… he’s the kind of guy who worries more about others than himself.”
“Yeah, I think he’s an incredibly… kind person, too. But he’s so kind that it’s kind of...” She gave a confused smile.
Riot chuckled briefly, as if in agreement. “That’s fine. It just means there are people like that in the New Continent, too.”
“You’re kind, too, Riot...”
“I’m just tagging along because it’s fun. I’m basically his guardian angel.”
They laughed for a while, then drained their cups.
“I’ve got an early start tomorrow, so I’m going to head to bed.”
“Wait, I’m leaving too.”
“Alright, then turn off the lights.” Riot stepped out into the cold hallway.
Behind her, Roel, clutching a stack of papers, caught up. Her blonde hair glistened in the darkness.
For some reason, she felt a sense of warmth in the night.

## 【Chapter 2: Weimar / Resistance】

“Don’t mess with me!” With a shout of anger, the table was kicked over. Immediately after, countless dishes were hurled onto the floor.
The sudden, deafening clatter sent the First Food Depot into an uproar.
“What the hell are you doing, Reys!”
“That’s what I’m asking you! I’m telling you to hurry up and bring breakfast!”
Reys lunged at him with all his might. But the ration officer grabbed the young boy by the collar and squeezed him hard. “I sent your Headquarters Company’s rations to the Food Service Department ages ago! If you’ve got a complaint, take it up with them!”

“That’s exactly what the Food Service Department says is missing! It’s our squad’s share!”
“What are you doing?!” Roel, who had rushed over, was out of breath. A crowd had gathered around the two men grappling in the food storage room. On one side were the ration officers; on the other, Reys’ comrades...
“Both of you, let go of each other right now!”
“Just so you know, it’s the Rations Department’s fault!” Reys released the ration officer as if shoving him away and roared. “This morning’s meal never showed up! Of course we’re gonna complain!”
“I’m telling you, we sent it!”
“Nothing ever shows up! How are we supposed to fight a war on an empty stomach? We only get one piece of bread a day as it is! We’ll starve to death before the Demon God even gets a chance to eat us!” Frustrated, he stomped his foot on the floor.
The ration officer glared at the boys with bloodshot eyes. “We’re doing our jobs properly, too! I don’t deserve to be nitpicked!”
“But there just isn’t any food!”
“Man, I’m so hungry.”
“What did you say?!”
“I mean, just serve us breakfast already.”
The young soldiers glared back at the ration officers. Faced with those stares, one of them clicked his tongue. “You guys... you’ve already eaten, haven’t you...?”
“Aren’t you actually planning to sneak another meal after you’ve already had breakfast?”
“This guy...!”
“Reys!”
Reys’s roar and Roel’s scream clashed. But just as they were about to lunge at him...
“Um...” Before they knew it, a blond-haired boy was standing between them. Justice, holding his Holy War Staff, smiled brightly and looked up at the ration officer.
“W-what is it, Holy War Officer...?”
“U-um... Do you have any left for me?” He said suddenly, in a carefree voice. “I haven’t had breakfast yet either. But if there is any, please give my portion to everyone else...”
“Lord Justice...” The ration officer looks at the group with a puzzled expression.
Both Reys and Roel stared at Justice’s back, looking puzzled.
The blond boy, however, kept smiling. “That’s fine with you, right?”
“Well, no, but…”
“Justice, what are you talking about?” Suddenly, Riott appeared from behind them. Scratching her red hair sleepily, Riot dispelled the strange tension in the air. “There’s no way one of your meals could sate Reys’ gang. Do the math.”
“But, I can’t fight on an empty stomach.”
“That’s exactly why you have to eat too! You’re hungry too, aren’t you?”
“N-no, I’m not!” He said with an innocent look on his face...
Justice’s stomach growled loudly.
Someone burst out laughing - one of the ration officers and one of the Rais’s comrades.
“Hmm, I guess it’s no good after all.”
“And you’re still growing!” Riot burst out laughing too, and Roel stifled a laugh.
“All right, I’ll bring it out right now.”

The ration officer's face finally relaxed. Justice also bowed his head slightly. After receiving the bag of bread from the ration officer, the blond boy walked over to Reys.
"Reys, this is for you guys…"
"Damn… thanks!" He roughly grabbed the bag and handed it to Def. Cheers rose from the boys at the sight of their long-awaited breakfast.
"Finally something to eat~ I'm starving!"
"I mean, thanks, Justice."
Justice just smiled silently. Stuffing their faces with bread, the group left the food storage room.
"We're trying our best, you know."
"I mean, I'm about to lose all motivation."
Without thinking, complaints slipped out of Def and the others' mouths.
Reys also gnawed on his bread with a look of frustration.
But Riot simply stared at the dejected boys. Even if she said something harsh, she understood all too well how angry Reys and the others were.
(Saying something won't change anything, will it?) She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. But suddenly, above their heads...
"Justice, the staff...!" Riot was the first to shout.
The Holy War Staff had begun to emit an ominous red glow.
The alarm sounded almost simultaneously.
"Emergency Combat Alert! Emergency Combat Alert!"
"Evil Spirit in Food Storage Facility No. 6! Emergency evacuation order issued for all Power Generation Zones! Citizens of the Power Generation District, evacuate immediately…"
Everyone's gaze shifted sharply. "Roel, the Sixth Food Storage Facility…"
"It's up ahead, in Sector 86!" Roel broke into a run, leading the way. "That's a grain warehouse! If our stockpiled wheat gets destroyed…"
"Got it! Justice!" But the boy she called out to was already surging past Roel. Gripping his Holy War Staff, his sacred armor fluttering behind him.
"No way! I'm going first!"
"Hey, you! Come on!" Lagging behind, Riot also took off running with the young soldiers clutching loaves of bread.
"This is our chance to prove ourselves to everyone! Let's really show them what we're made of!"
"Leave it to me, I'll take care of it!" Reys flashed a white-toothed grin.
Their sprint drove them straight into the heart of the invasion.
"A dimensional distortion! An Evil Spirit is coming!"
The panicked ration officers let out screams. Ripples spread across the fiber-cement ceiling. The ripples swirled, eventually erupting into a shrill, piercing scream.
"Ika-a! Ika-a! Reg! Reg! Ika-a!"
An ear-splitting language flooded into their eardrums.
From the warped gateway of space-time, a gigantic shadow descended with a roar. It frantically flapped its gray-brown wings and knocked over the grain silo with its massive tail.

It was not just one. Two more appeared in quick succession. The evil spirits glared left and right with their two heads. Both had long, sharp beaks protruding from their mouths. Their beaks were lined with saw-like teeth, and saliva dripping from them onto the floor signaled their voracious appetite.

The monstrous, bird-like evil spirits swooped down on the ration officers with their seven-fingered arms. “Aaaargh!” Mercilessly, the evil spirit’s foot came crashing down. The pink entrails of someone who had just screamed were splattered all over the floor.

“Too late....!”

As soon as they reached the Sixth Food Depot, Justice bit his lip. The area was stained crimson with blood and flesh. Roel, who had arrived late, fought back the urge to vomit at the overwhelming stench of blood.

“Roel, leave this to me!”

“That won’t do—I’m fighting too!” Justice stood his ground directly in front of the demon god. With her right hand, Roel brandished a Zodanium’s sword.

“Justice, be careful!”

Nodding to Roel, he turned her gaze back to the Evil Spirits. His right hand formed a holy seal with great force. “First Strike… Circumventing Impact Bullet!” At the tip of the Holy War Staff, the rare gem Metalite exploded. The summoned offensive miracle was sent forth with great force from Justice’s holy seal.

“Ikaa! Ikaa! Reg! Reg! Ikaa!” The lead Evil Spirit panicked and retreated - but the God of Creation’s strike split into four in midair, piercing the Evil Spirit’s side and back. At the moment of impact, the food storage room shook so violently it seemed to tilt.

“Aaaah!” The tremor slammed Roel against the wall.

Yet the Evil God, who should have been blown to pieces, let out a thunderous roar. Dripping dark blue bodily fluid from its wounds, the Evil Spirt took a step forward.

“Reg! Reg! Ika!”

“It’s not working... Are these guys of the Demon Lord level?!” The moment he realized this, he leaped back. The Demon Lord’s seven-fingered claw slammed down where he had been standing just a moment ago. Then again. The Demon Lord’s claws tore through the concrete floor with ease.

“Justice! Don’t back down!” Riot yanked her prosthetic left arm free. The combat functions activated simultaneously, spitting blue text onto his artificial retina.

“All artificial muscles, limiter disengaged. Automatic grenade launcher, lock-on. Post-combat activities, registered in the Record Sphere.”

“You’re in the way, you three-headed monster!” She swung around, revealing her 40mm grenade launcher. With a deafening roar, she fired a barrage of anti-demon shotgun rounds. The explosions momentarily halted the Demon God’s charge. But...

“Get back! Something’s...!” Sensing danger, Roel issued a warning.

The lead Evil Spirit gleefully rattled his two throats. The pouches attached beneath his left and right jaws began to swell up with a disgusting “boo.”

“Reg! Reg! Ika!”

“This is bad...!” The moment Riot shouted, it exploded. The two-headed Demon Lord vomited a milky-white liquid from its mouth. Spewed out with force, it landed at Roel and Riot’s feet and behind Justice.

Instantly, there was a sizzling sound. The vomit melted the fiber cement, spreading a foul stench and steam. It also unfortunately struck the backs of the ration officers who were too slow to escape.

“Gyaaaaaah!” The flesh and bones of those who hadn’t escaped in time vaporized instantly. It tore through the air, killing several people.

“This thing...!” Justice prepared for a second strike.

Just then, more acidic vomit flew toward him - the two remaining creatures vomited wildly at will. He retreated to regroup. Then, another strike. He had no time to focus his spiritual energy on the Holy War Officer.

“I’ll draw them in!” Suddenly, Reys shouted. The boy, having finished preparing his sniper rifle, pulled the bolt back in a standing position. With his comrades flanking him on either side, Reys focused his attention on the scope.

“I’m your opponent, you man-eating bitch!” The first round was fired along with the signal shot. Reys’ precise shot pierced the Evil Spirit’s eyeball clean through. Another shot followed. The next round shattered one of the pouches beneath the cheeks.

“Reg! Reg! Ika!” The Demon God at the front writhed in agony from the Zodanium bullets. But undeterred, Def and Jam opened fire as well - yet the Evil Spirit’s wounds began to heal in the blink of an eye.

“Ika! Ika! Reg! Reg! Ika!” The Evil Spirit bellowed in frustration.

Hearing that, Reys also shouted in exasperation.

“Stubborn bastard, damn it...”

Just then, a deep, booming voice suddenly rang out from behind them. “Roel! Bauser’s First Battalion is here!” He spat out the cigarette he was holding and shouted. “Fall back for now! Let me have my moment in the spotlight!” Bauser, the mercenary, slung his massive anti-tank rifle over his hip and burst into the food storage room. With ammunition belts slung over both shoulders, he advanced effortlessly toward the Demon Lords. “I guess I have no choice. I’ll work my pay!”

Explosions thundered one after another. With gunfire-like bursts, Zodanium armor-piercing rounds met the swarm of Evil Spirits. The bullets that embedded themselves in the Evil Spirits exploded inside their bodies.

“Ikaa! Ikaa!”

Ignoring the screams, he continued his rapid fire. Scorched spent cartridges scattered across the floor.

“Bauser!” Justice called out to the reinforcements. One after another, volunteer soldiers poured in from behind Bauser.

“Lang, Hepner, move to the left!” Bauser issued orders through the mouthpiece attached to his headset. “Hans, join up with Reys and the others on the right! Kruger, hold off the new recruits!” The volunteers scattered to the left and right - the last group to appear was made up of children and elderly people who had only been assigned yesterday.

“Eeeek!” Faced with the Divine Beast, screams rose immediately.

But Bauser turned around and shouted angrily. “All new recruits, put your guns on the floor! Hold hands with the person next to you! You don’t have to fight right now!”

The scattered volunteers met the Evil Spirit with crossfire. Shouts and gunfire deafened the air.

The raging colossus launched a counterattack. Swinging its seven-fingered claws, it tore the volunteers' bodies to shreds. It countered the gunfire with acidic vomit. The new recruits began to tremble uncontrollably. If they'd still been holding their guns, they would have fired wildly.

But at that very moment...

"Power amplification ready! Second strike!" Justice's resolve finally reached its peak. The boy's holy seal was directed at the three evil gods. "Holy Inferno Strike!" The offensive miracle had been deliberately delayed. In its place, a power amplification ring was cast, and the Holy War unleashed a massive burst of holy light.

"Ikaa! Ikaa! Reg! Reg! Ikaa!" The evil spirits, trying to escape, crashed into the wall of the food storage room. The battlefield was far too narrow for their massive bodies.

A rapid succession of ancient sacred letters swiftly surrounded the three of them. Justice made the sign of the cross with his holy seal.

“Burn them to ashes!” The script spread out in all directions. Flame attacks rained down from above, below, left, and right, incinerating the evil spirits. Scorched by the flames of the Creator God, the spirits’ bodies began to melt into a gooey mess.

“W-wow...” The young soldiers stumbled backward from the heat of the flames.

Roel, too, was stunned by the miracle’s power. “That’s... Justice’s power...”

But then, a furious shout rang out again.

“Watch out! It’s still alive!” Bowser raised his gun.

Two of the evil spirits had already melted away completely. But the last one, seizing upon the string of miracle characters, let out a defiant roar. It tore through the encirclement, whose power was fading, and advanced with its half-melted colossal body.

“Damn it...!” Bowser’s gunfire provided cover as Justice retreated. “Take one more shot at it, Justice!” The mercenary fired his bullets without hesitation. “That’ll finish it off! Just get it over with!”

Both Reys and Roel turned their expectant gazes toward the Holy Warrior. Justice had already formed the Holy Seal. A holy light shone from his Holy Staff.

“Final Strike...!”

“Justice, leave it to me!” Just then, Riot’s battle cry rang out. The Battle Armor Demon shoved Justice aside and charged straight toward the Evil God. She kicked off the floor and leaped into the air.

“Target acquired, lock-on maintained until further orders. Measuring magical energy output.” Battle data flashed frantically across her retinas. She drew the Zodanium greatsword from her back and swung it down at lightning speed from both sides.

“Ika-a! Ika-a! Leg! Leg! Ika-a!” The two heads snarled menacingly at Riot, their wide-open beaks tried to spew vomit - but it was too late. The twin blades pierced both of the Evil Spirit’s heads, severing the two heads clean off.

“Riot!” Justice let out a cry of relief.

The Evil God’s heads fell to the floor, and its massive body toppled over. The writhing body steamed and melted away. A moment later, Riot returned to the ground. Brushing bodily fluids from her blades, the Battle Armor Demon let out a deep sigh.

“That’s about it.”

“Yay! That was amazing, Riot!” Justice happily threw himself into his partner’s arms. Riot caught the boy.

(...That was close...) Holding Justice close, the Battle Armor Demon felt a sense of relief. It was a close call—she’d made it just in time.

Reys slowly lowered his gun. Roel also quietly sheathed her blade.

Bauser lowered his gun as well and lit a new cigarette. “Well, well... I wish you’d left me a little more of the spotlight. You two went and took care of it all by yourselves.” He grimaced and laughed, glancing behind him. “Listen, what just happened was a battle against the Demon God. They’re a hell of an enemy... but we have a chance. If we work together. Don’t forget that.”

The new recruits were still holding hands. They were speechless, overwhelmed by their fear of the Demon Gods and the power of the miracle.

“Oh well,” Bauser said, exhaling a puff of smoke.

“...........” Roel bit his lip as she surveyed the desolate battlefield.

Several granaries had collapsed, spilling wheat across the floor. Stained by the Demon God’s bodily fluids, it had turned a bluish-black.

“Roel...” And scattered everywhere were the corpses of the victims, reduced to masses of flesh. There was barely room to step. Justice, who had approached, noticed this as well.

But the commander shook her head, banishing the despair. “Right now, our priority is tending to the wounded. Everyone, please help out...” Saying this, she glanced at the demon god’s corpse. “Moving this is going to be a real hassle. I’m worried about magical contamination, so we’ll move the grain silos to a separate location.”

“There’s space in the Third Fuel Depot. The tanks are self-propelled, so transport won’t be a problem.” The ration officer who had approached offered his advice.

Nodding, Roel ran a hand through her hair. “Right… Reys! We’ll move the grain silos. Help out the Rations Department.”

“You sure know how to work people hard. Oh well, whatever.” Reys summoned his squad. Then, he suddenly turned his gaze toward Justice.

“You… you really are something else…”

“Huh? You mean the miracles?” Justice gripped his Holy War Staff and smiled. “That’s the power of the Creator God, not my own.”

“You idiot, I know that…”

“And you, Reys… you really are the best sniper in the Volunteer Army. To shoot out the Eye of the Evil Spirit…”

“Heh, well, yeah!” Reys puffed out his chest proudly. “No one can beat me at shooting. I can hit any target.”

“Seriously, big bro, you really are a total ace!”

“Or should I say, that was some god-tier skill?” The young soldiers let out sighs of relief.

But Bauser scanned the area, made a bitter face, and clicked his tongue. “Still, that was a costly victory. First off, a whole day’s worth of rations is gone. Now we’re down to half a loaf of bread a day.” He kicked the Demon God’s corpse aside as if it were a nuisance. “And I’m impressed that they’ve sent a Demon Lord of the Count rank. Until now, we’d never even faced one higher than the Knight class.”

Justice remained silent, lowering his eyes. “I should have fought somewhere other than here.” He muttered suddenly, as if reflecting on his mistake. “I ended up wasting precious wheat… I’m going to fast starting tomorrow.”

Roel smiled at the boy. “Justice, if it weren’t for you, we never could have won. Besides, there’s no way we could’ve lured the Evil Spirit out of this cramped granary.”

Riot took over from there. “You did a great job. You took down the Demon God pretty much all by yourself. Just be happy about it for now.” The Battle Armor Demon placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. But the one who felt the most relieved of all was Riot.

(If we’d been just a little late... Justice would have used his last miracle.)What kind of situation would that have caused? Just thinking about it made his stomach ache. She let out a sigh of relief, careful not to let anyone notice.

“Besides, it’s not like we’re at a complete disadvantage now, is it?” Bauser said, looking at the Demon God’s remains. “If the enemy’s forces are limited, losing three Count-rank Evil Spirits must be a major blow, right?”

“I hope so...” But the moment Justice smiled...

“A major blow, you say...?” A groan like the tolling of a bell echoed through the granary. “Don’t be stupid…”

Riot raised her greatsword in both hands. Justice gripped his Holy War Staff. Roel drew her sword, and Bauser raised his gun. Reys also lowered his sniper rifle from his shoulder. Without a signal, the five of them stood back-to-back, scanning their surroundings. All around them, the volunteer soldiers gripped their weapons tightly.

“What? There are still enemies here?!”

“Lady Roel! Lord Bauser!” Just as panic began to spread…

A gale swept through. A surging cold wind, accompanied by a blizzard, surrounded the five of them.

“First Strike...”

“Look up! Everyone, scatter!”

“Ice Demon Restraint Encirclement!” The magic spell crashed down with a thunderous roar. A bone-chilling tornado, sharp enough to tear flesh, surged down from above. A freezing cold that froze the very bones swept over their entire bodies.

“Whoa…!”

“Ah, big bro!”

Swept up by the tornado, the young soldiers were blown all the way to the wall. Only Reys managed to desperately hold his ground.

“Damn it, everyone…!”

“Guh...!” A muffled scream escaped from Roel’s red lips. The commander dropped her sword and collapsed onto the floor.

Justice caught her in his arms. “N-no, not the floor! You’ll freeze on it!” Realizing she had already frozen, the Holy War Officer desperately supported Roel.

Bauser, too, stared intently at the frost forming on the barrel of his gun.

“This tornado… it feels unusually strong…”

“You ignorant fool. This isn’t just any tornado…” Accompanied by a mocking laugh, another white tornado appeared. “This is the magic I received from the Evil Spirit, Lord N’Gai Veil…” The new tornado vanished almost immediately - but in its wake appeared a tall, slender young man, flashing a cruel, mocking smile.

“So there really was a mastermind behind this...” Riot continued to grip her sword with determination. “A power on par with a Demon Lord...”

“If you’re a minion of a Duke-level Evil Spirit, you must be pretty famous...”

“Bogdanov…” The young man gave his name briefly. “In the state of Volga, I laid to rest a city called Giev. You must’ve heard of it.”

Reys’s throat tightened involuntarily. His face was ashen.

In the center of Bogdanov’s pale forehead, a twisted pattern flickered red.

“The Heretical Sect’s Mark…!”

“A Blood Oath-sworn…!”

Fear and anxiety spread across everyone’s faces. There was not a shred of vitality to be felt. He should have been young, yet his long white hair hung down to his

shoulders. Wrapped in a long white cloak that hid him down to his toes, he flashed a cruel gaze. “My master desires further sacrifices. This town must also be wiped out. Do not take it personally.”

“Than fight me, you bastard!!!” Reys raised his prized sniper rifle. With frost on the scope, an accurate shot was impossible - but he was at point-blank range. Just as he placed his finger on the trigger, convinced that if he fired, he would hit his target…

“You’re a confident one, kid… But you must know - confidence and arrogance are quite different…” The voice whispered right into his ear. He had vanished without a trace.

The moment he realized this, Reys spun around. Bogdanov’s face was right in front of the boy. The Blood Oath member had teleported right into the center of the circle formed by Justice and the others.

“Aaaaaaah...!” His scream failed to form a sound. The sniper rifle shook violently. Bogdanov gripped the barrel and crushed it in one swift motion.

“Do you understand the difference now...?” But he couldn’t respond. All he could do was grit his teeth.

“Reiz, get out of here!” Still holding Roel, Justice attempted to form the Holy Seal. But faster than that, Riot drew the greatsword from her back.
“You make me sick, you pale-faced freak!” Before the chill could reach the blade, the Battle Armor Demon struck a blow. Though they were close enough for their noses to touch, the Blood Pact member leapt vertically overhead. Flailing his long cloak, he landed on the floor with a dance-like grace.
“Well, well, the newcomer certainly knows how to entertain…”
“I’ve grown quite tired of this battle, you see…”
“Don’t mess with me! Fire!” Instantly, gunfire erupted. The enraged soldiers of the First Battalion unleashed a barrage of crossfire at the Blood Pact member. Yet even as bullets struck his long cloak, Bogdanov’s smile never faltered.
“Second strike... Extreme Pressure Freeze!” He raised both arms and laughed maniacally. Countless icicles shot out from around the Blood Alliance member. Racing through the air, they pierced the soldiers’ bodies one after another.
“Run! Zetter! Paulus!”
“Gaaaaaah!”
Bauser’s screams fell on deaf ears. The icicles that pierced the soldiers exploded mercilessly inside their bodies. Arms were torn off, skulls blown apart, fresh blood splattered everywhere, and flesh and blood flew through the air.
(What a monster...) Reiz watched the massacre in a daze. (So that’s the power of a Blood Oath... )
Suddenly, he looked down at his own body. Reys’s combat uniform was stained bright red. Someone’s spattered blood, someone’s spattered entrails... and someone’s spattered eyeball was staring up at Reys from the floor. Vomit rose to the back of his throat. Laughing loudly at that terror, Bogdanov kicked the victims aside.
“You think you’re so strong just because you’ve took down three Evil Spirits?! Know your place, you fools!”
Bauser’s back teeth ground together, and the veins in his neck bulged. “You bastard... I’ll kill you!” But the mercenary’s finger wouldn’t budge an inch. The trigger of his anti-tank rifle had frozen solid.
“Riot!” Justice could do nothing but support Roel. His arms and legs were rapidly succumbing to frostbite. Blood flow was beginning to slow, and the extreme cold was starting to disrupt Riot’s systems as well. Countless error messages flashed across the Battle Armor Demon’s retinas.
“Overall combat accuracy down 40%. Main Power Reactor Requests Restart”.
The Blood Alliance members let out a roar of laughter at the motionless Riot.
“Even the Battle Armor Demon seems to have given up, it seems. Then let’s finish this... I’ll kill all the leaders of the Volunteer Army in one fell swoop...” He started to say, then turned around But just as Bogdanov was about to catch up to him, a gust of wind swept in, brandishing a gleaming blade.
“Hayate!”
“Hoooooo…!” The strategist who had appeared drew the katana from his waist. He swung it upward from a low stance, aiming for the Blood Pact member’s chest - but Bogdanov’s movements were just as fast.
“Don’t bother.” The moment he dodged, a black arm flashed through the air, closing in to smash Hayate’s skull.

"You little brat...!" The katana met the Blood Oath member's cursed arm head-on. With a shrill clang and a shower of sparks, Hayate swept Bogdanov's strike wide.

"Shall I ask your name, Samurai…" Landing, Bogdanov licked his lips. "I see you're a master of the katana… quite the specimen…"

"I am Hayate, of the Land of Yamato…" Hayate landed and caught his breath. "This is my first and last introduction…!" A fierce aura erupted from Hayate's entire body. "Divine Thunder Flash Sword Strike!" Hayate's sword shot out of its sheath.

*"Divine Thunder Flash Sword Strike!"*
*The heat wave of light emitted from Hayate's sword sliced through the magical tornado charged towards his ally!*

The swung blade severed the magical tornado and scorched the blizzard. The heat wave from the burst of light raced through the air, charging straight toward Bogdanov.

"You bastard!" The Blood Oath member tried to flee, his cloak billowing behind him. But the strike that flew from Hayate's sword slashed diagonally across Bogdanov's body. His long cloak tore, and bright red blood spurted upward.

"Aaaah!" Bogdanov let out a scream of both rage and pain. The Blood Pact member's body swayed violently. "Y-you...!"

"I won't let you escape!" Hayate closed the distance in one swift motion and raised his blade once more. But...

"...Gah...!" The strategist clutched his mouth and dropped to his knees. Fresh blood dripped from between his fingers. Hayate collapsed lifelessly onto the floor.

"Lord Hayate!" Justice and Bauser shouted simultaneously.

But only Riott charged forward - she sprinted through the magic that had lost its potency. Seizing the moment when Bogdanov was off guard, she closed the distance in a single burst. As soon as she pulled out her prosthetic arm, she unleashed a rapid-fire burst from her 40mm automatic grenade launcher. “Die, you white-haired brat!” She fired at the Blood Oath member, her curse ringing out alongside the shots - but Riott’s aiming ability had deteriorated significantly. The grenades exploded around Bogdanov, sending sparks flying. Covered in his own blood, the Blood Oath-sworn, enraged, charged at Riott.

“Don’t get too cocky, you cyborg!” He dove into Riot’s chest and grabbed the grenade launcher. Instantly, a blast of cold air erupted from his palm. The Battle Armor Demon’s prosthetic arm froze solid in an instant.

“You bastard! Let go of me!” But right before his screaming eyes, his left arm was crushed to smithereens. Riot scrambled backward in panic. “You…!”

“That’s what I’d like to say… How dare you lay a hand on me…” Bogdanov looked down at his blood-stained hands and gnashed his teeth in hatred. Something strange flickered in and out of view beneath his torn cloak. Riot’s throat tightened as he pointed at the Blood Pact member.

“Wait! Bogdanov! That body… you… surely not…”

“Don’t think you’ve won yet…” Ignoring the Battle Armor Demon, Bogdanov said. “I shall subject you all to an even greater hunger... And distrust, chaos, and betrayal as well... And at the very end, after you have fully tasted fear... You will taste the flavor of destruction...”

Justice tried to rush forward in anger. But the Blood Pact member’s figure vanished into the sudden blizzard.

Then, a dazed Roel that clung weakly to the boy, said: “Justice… I’m so cold…” The girl’s body was like an icicle.

“Roel, pull yourself together!” He dropped the Holy War Staff and wrapped his arms around Roel. The young soldiers rushed over as well.

“Here’s a blanket—wrap this around her!”

“Damn, it’s cold! It feels like I’m frozen solid!”

“Bro, are you okay?!”

“Yeah, sorry...” That was all he could say to his comrades rushing over.

Reiz had already collapsed to his knees. He had no strength left to stand. (Me... me... Me... just now, I really...) He looked down at his combat uniform once more. Flecks of someone’s flesh, scattered everywhere, stung his eyes. Once again, his throat spasmed. The filth he’d been holding back surged up all at once.

Reys vomited without holding back.

“Bro, pull yourself together! Bro!”

Meanwhile, Bauser was cradling Hayate’s collapsed body.

“Hayate, you’ve pushed yourself too hard!” Dark, thick blood flowed unabashedly from between the Strategist’s fingers as he pressed them to his mouth. It dripped down his chest, staining his legs crimson.

“...I failed...” He muttered in frustration, clenching his teeth against the pain.

Riot looked down at her left arm. Everything from the elbow down was shattered to pieces. Sparks were flying from the exposed interior of her arm. “Next time, I will

definitely win..." The Battle Armor Demon clenched her remaining right hand and spoke to herself. "Next time, I will definitely... take his life..."
Amidst the din, she told herself clearly.

## 【Chapter 3: Weimar / Betrayal】

The smell of machine oil stung her nose. She aimed the brand-new barrel at the wall and locked onto the target. Riot waited for the indicator light to flash on her retina.
"New weapon system recognized. Connecting to auto-aim function. Confirming simultaneous activation with prosthetic arm."
"Alright, here we go!" Receiving the signal, she licked her lips. At the same moment, a small Gatling gun extending from Riot's elbow unleashed a furious barrage of fire. Images of an Evil Spirit danced chaotically across the training ground's walls - the gunfire pierced through every single one of those target images.
"Target destruction rate: 968%. Average target destruction speed: 0.24. Your shooting rank is AAA overall." The analysis announcement echoed through the arena.
Riot responded cheerfully to the recorded, emotionless female voice. "Well, thank you…"
"It seems to be working well, ey?" The elderly technicians peered into the Battle Armor Demon.
Riot blew away the gun smoke in a single breath. "It's lighter than before. This is good." Riot ran her hand along the black barrel. "It's not as powerful as a 40mm grenade launcher, but… for close-quarters combat, this might be better." Three 5.56mm automatic rifle barrels were bundled together on the Battle Armor Demon's left arm. It was a new arm.
"We don't have a production line for grenade launchers… but it can fire Zodanium rounds. Against an Evil Spirit, they're more effective than grenades." The old man spoke as he handed over a large magazine. "It holds two hundred rounds. If you fire fully automatic, you'll empty it in about ten seconds…"
"I know that. I'll use it on semi-auto." Riot stood up and effortlessly took the magazine – it would've been heavy for anyone else except her. Then she turned around.
Behind her, about a hundred new recruits were, for some reason, lying flat on the floor.
"What the hell are you guys doing?"
"W-We were just startled by the gunshot just now..."
"You've got to be kidding me! Stop this idiocy now!" But the faces of the new recruits assigned to the First Battalion were all grim. Riot grimaced as she swung his new rifle around. "Well, gunfire is a constant on the battlefield! Do you really think you can fight if you're scared of something like this?!"
"I'll get used to it! I'll make sure I do!" A young recruit stood at attention and saluted.
The Battle Armor Demon smiled gently at his tense face.
"Oh, really? You're quite the quick learner... Well then, go ahead and get used to it!" No sooner had she spoken than she drew her pistol with her right hand. The Riot fired a uranium armor-piercing round at the recruit's feet. He jumped up and froze in place.
"Aaaargh!"
"You said you'd get used to it! You were lying just now!"

“I wasn’t lying, but… live ammunition is…”
“You’re going to get used to live rounds! Live rounds!” She holstered her gun, and the Battle Armor Demon flung her cloak back. “You’ll get used to it in an hour. We’ll do the same test again later!”
“N-no way... Commander Bauser, do something!” A chorus of despair called out to the mercenary - but their leader was sprawled on the floor as usual. It was as if yesterday’s battle had never happened.
“Stop making a racket first thing in the morning. I’m tired.”
“But Lady Riot..!”
“I’ve left the training to others. It’s my policy not to interfere or pay for it.” He took another swig at his bottle and grinned. “Besides, I used up too much energy in yesterday’s battle. Give me the day off today. Riot, I’ll leave the regular meeting to you.”
Riot was too exhausted even to be exasperated anymore. She looked down at Bauser with a puzzled expression. “Nothing but booze again... Well, I’ll leave the rest to you. Make sure to keep an eye out for any slackers!”
“Leave it to me. I’m strict with slackers.” He nodded and raised his cup. “If there’s anyone slacking off more than me, I’ll give them a hundred lashes.”
“I’d be impressed to find someone more lazy than you.” Muttering the words as if spitting them out, Riot quickly left the training ground.
It was her third morning in Weimar. People passing by greeted her naturally, and the volunteer soldiers saluted her with reverence.
(Is all this respect due to yesterday’s battle...?) News of the appearance and defeat of a Blood Oath-sworn had spread like wildfire among the citizens. Of course, the tragic news of the food supply’s disappearance had also reached them, but the good news had a stronger impact. Returning the countless salutes, Riot hurried along the path to the administrative district. At the Joint Operations Headquarters, members of the regular meeting had already begun to gather. But as she scanned the faces, Riot let out a voice of exasperation.
“Hey, what’s a sick person doing here?!”
Across the round table, Hayate was issuing orders one after another into his mobile communicator. His face was still ashen. “A night’s rest is enough. We’ve got more work to do.”
“Even so...” Riot leaned against the table “You coughed up that much blood yesterday...”
“It’s not the first time. Don’t worry.” The strategist declared this with a blank expression. His fighting spirit was enough to astonish even Riot.
“You’re quite the stubborn samurai, aren’t you?”
“I can tell the enemy is finally getting serious. They won’t wait for a decisive battle.”
And then...
“E-enough already, Justice!”
“What are you talking about? It’s not over yet!”
Roel, her sleeves rolled up, came running in with a bright red face. Her thin arms, swollen and red, were frostbitten from the cold she sustained during yesterday’s battle. Justice, clutching ointment and his holy staff, chased after her. With a worried look on his face, he stops Roel as she tries to run away.

“I haven’t finished applying the ointment yet! Come on, stick out your arm!”
“E-everyone’s watching! It’s embarrassing!”
“Why? I’m just putting ointment on it.”
“It’s just embarrassing, that’s all!”
Riot folded her arms and chuckled. “What’s with you two? You’re so carefree at a time like this. Playing house?” Riot’s chuckle set off a burst of laughter from those around them. Roel hurriedly pulled her arm back.
“Ah, Riot… um… this morning’s regular meeting was about the reallocation of surplus fuel…”
“That can wait. How’s Roel?” Laughing, Riot nudged her partner’s small shoulder with her elbow. “Since you nursed her back to health, she’s probably recovering pretty quickly, ey?”
“Yeah. I’m taking good care of her.” Justice replied cheerfully.
But Roel’s face had turned bright red. “P-please don’t get the wrong idea, Ms. Riott. We were in the same hospital room yesterday, but nothing weird happened...”

“Really? What do you mean by “weird”, anyway?” Riot gave Roel a sidelong glance, teasing him. “You sure picked my interest, sis… Care to explain it in detail?”
“Oh, come on, Riot!” Once again, a wave of laughter swept through the room.
Roel blushed and looked flustered. It was an expression she’d never shown before. Seeing her laugh like this…
(She’s just a thirteen-year-old, isn’t she...)
Roel seemed a little pitiful. “A-anyway, we have to start the regular meeting! Please hand me this morning’s reports from each department!” She rushed toward the communications officers as if fleeing. Around the round table, where laughter still lingered, the meeting members gradually took their seats. As some entered the room, they sought a handshake from Justice.
“I hear you really showed them Spirits yesterday...”
“No, not at all...”
“I’m counting on you from now on, too.” Everyone offered their praise one after another - but Riott pulled her partner’s arm and lowered her voice significantly.
“Hey, Justice...”
“Huh? What?”
“You DID do your daily meditations, right..?” She asked in a hushed, serious tone.
Justice nodded quietly once more. “I’m fine. I slept well last night. I can summon three miracles now.”
“Not three. Two.” Riot insisted firmly. “You tried to use it three times yesterday too, didn’t you? But you absolutely mustn’t. It’s for your own good.”
“Yeah, you’re right...” Justice replied in a small voice. He always answered that way. And yet, things never turned out as he said they would.
Riot saw right through him and let out a sigh. “Listen, you know...”
“Ah, Reys...!” Cutting off the conversation, Justice rushed over to the young sniper.
Reys, who had just entered the room, looked up in a hurry. “Oh, it’s you...” He replied with a face still showing signs of fatigue.
Justice peered at Reys’s face with concern. “Are you okay now? Is everything alright?”
“...Shut up, you nosy...” Reys pushed Justice aside and slid into his usual seat. It was his usual curt greeting. But...
“I wonder if everything's really going to be okay, Reys...”
“It'll work out somehow. Let’s go, the meeting’s about to start.”
Anyone can panic in battle. And Reys, after all, wasn’t a soldier to begin with. He may have gained some experience during this month-long siege, but this was the first time he’d fought against a member of the Blood Oath-sworn. It’s no wonder he was in shock.
(Well, anyone experiences something like that at least once...) Riot thought back to her childhood. Her first time on the battlefield... she still couldn’t forget that terror. But seasoned veterans like Bauser and Hayate had managed to overcome that fear. (Yeah, it’ll all work out somehow…) She returned her gaze to the report in her hands and decided to believe it.
Yes, for at this moment…
“What the hell is going on! Give us food!” People were in an uproar in the corridors of the Power Plant District. The crowd, fists raised, was being held back by a line of volunteer soldiers.

"Just back off! This must be some kind of mistake!"
"Are you trying to starve us to death?!"
"Please, even half a loaf of bread would be enough..."
The corridor leading to the food depot was packed to the brim. The besieged residents were jostling against one another in the narrow passageway. Amidst the pushing and shoving, Roel came running up from behind.
"What on earth is going on here?!"
"It's the residents of Sector 43!" Mingling with the volunteer soldiers, a ration officer shouted hoarsely. "They say this morning's breakfast hasn't arrived! The food service vehicles left ages ago..." Wiping the sweat from his brow, he turned to face them once more. "We should have sent this morning's supply! Who's in charge of receiving it?"
"Don't lie! If it's not here, it's not here!"
"Someone must have hidden it! No doubt about it!"
"That can't be! I'm not lying!"
Riot, who had rushed over late, stood there in a daze. The starving people were all elderly. (Where in the hell do these shriveled old husks find the strength to protest?) She even felt a sense of terror at the power hunger could unleash.
"Everyone... what's the..." Finally, Justice arrived as well. The boy clutching the Holy War Staff was at a loss for words. His expression was that of someone who had witnessed hell firsthand.
"Everyone, calm down!" Roel boldly cut through the commotion. "I'll hand over the food right now! So calm down and go back to your quarters!"
"I can't believe this, Ms. Roel!" An elderly man raised his fist. "You're trying to starve us old folks so you can hoard the food, aren't you?!"
"That's ridiculous!" Justice was the first to shout, stepping in front of the crowd. "Roel isn't that kind of person! You all know that better than anyone!"
"How can you not trust Roel?" Riot also spoke in a calm voice. "Anyway... it's getting cold out here. Let's calm down and head back to our quarters."
A cold silence filled the corridor. Distrust and hunger lingered in the air. Unable to bridge the deep divide, the elderly men began to back away. And then...
"It's easy for you. You don't need to eat much… after all, you're a cyborg…You can't possibly understand how a flesh-and-blood human feels…" A bitter voice was directed at Riot.
Roel's face twisted in a grimace. "What are you—"
Riot stopped her before she could finish. They locked eyes, and the Battle Armor Demon shook her head. "They're right. So don't worry about it."
"Riot..."
The Battle Armor Demon forced a smile. "We're gonna go look for the missing food."
Riot put on a brave smile. "Roel, you'd better get some food ready. Seriously... you look really on edge."
"Yeah... but..."
"We'll talk later. Action comes first." The Battle Armor Demon quickly turned on her heel. "Otherwise the tension will explode again…"
"Don't worry about us, Roel." Justice nodded from the side. "We'll contact you if anything happens, okay?"

“Got it. Be careful.”
“Let’s go, Justice!” Riot quickly turned her back on the group. Justice gently clasped her hand. Without a word, he squeezed it tightly for just a moment. The boy’s palm was surprisingly warm. Feeling that warmth, Riot wanted to thank him.
Justice and Riot cautiously began their search.

Sector 43 was located on the outskirts of the commercial district. It was situated two levels above the Food Service Department of the Energy District. That said, the transport routes were limited. iot had already registered all the data for the underground passages into the navigation system in her skull. The two of them followed the transport route without getting lost.
“The delivery route to Sector 43 is this way.” Justice pointed his Holy War Staff toward the far end of the three-way intersection - but there was another path branching off in one direction. Looking at the map, it was the route back to the surface via the Power Generation District.
“I’m heading to Sector 43 first. You go check this way out.” With that, Riot tossed him a pair of headphones equipped with a throat-mounted microphone. “If anything happens, use this to contact me. You know how to use it, right?”
“Yeah, well then...!” Clutching the map, Justice broke into a run. Glancing left and right, he turned down a passageway and descended the slope. Passing through the Administrative District, the noise of the Power Generation District grew closer. And just as he reached the lower levels...
“That’s...!” He came to a sudden halt. He had reached the underground vehicle yard - in the darkness, several six-wheeled trucks were lined up. They were emergency evacuation vehicles. Among them stood a silver food transport truck, looking completely out of place. Its windshield had been brutally smashed.
Justice calmed himself and looked up at the Holy War Staff - but the rare gem Metalite didn’t glow. Making sure this wasn’t an attack by the Evil God, Justice approached the transport truck. And then...
“W-what happened here?!” He shouted toward the driver’s seat. Glass shards were scattered all over the interior. Two members of the cafeteria club were bound with their hands tied behind their backs, struggling desperately. Their mouths were also covered with rags. Hurrying to tear off the cloth, the young man screamed.
“I’m s-sorry, we were attacked!”
“By whom?”
“I don’t know, it happened so suddenly…” The other one caught his breath and began to speak. “At the three-way intersection, I was thrown into the driver’s seat. I have absolutely no idea what happened after that...”
The cafeteria worker who had broken free from his restraints picked up a rolling metal can. It was a fast-acting hypnotic gas canister. “This is what they used, Justice...”
Rushing out of the driver’s seat, Justice peered into the cargo area. Everything was gone. He put on his headphones and spoke into the microphone, but a deafening roar of noise filled his ears. “Go back and report this. I’ll look for the food.” As he spoke, Justice unfolded a map. “The only way out of here is the underground passage leading out of the city… I’m going to look for it!”
“No way! All by yourself?!”

“That passage is where the evil god appeared! Just in case, you should call for backup…”
But Justice shook his head. “It’s been over two hours since you were attacked, hasn’t it? If the thieves make it out of the city… we won’t be able to get our precious food back. I’ll go ahead on my own!” Without waiting for a reply, the boy dashed deeper into the tunnel.

Several silver tanks stood in a row. Located on the outskirts of the Power and Fuel District, the facility was designed to pump up groundwater, filter it, and purify it into drinking water — for the entire city of Weimar, of course. The section known as the water supply plant was a vital hub for securing drinking water. Volunteer soldiers on guard duty patrolled the narrow, dark corridors of the facility day and night. One of them...
“What’s that...?” With his automatic rifle slung over his shoulder, he furrowed his brow. A small figure darted across the row of water purification tanks. It was still too early for the shift change. The soldier casually peered into the shadows behind the tanks.
“Who’s there? Someone, go check it out!” A jolt shot through the back of his head. His body swayed, and before he could react, a fist slammed into his solar plexus. He lost consciousness instantly and collapsed to the floor.
“Def! You idiot! We’ve been spotted!” Lowering his voice, Reys cursed. “It’s because you were dawdling! You slowpoke!”
“Don’t call me a slowpoke, man. That’s kinda gross.” Glancing around, Def whispered.
“But hey, are you sure this is okay, bro?”
“What? Getting cold feet now?”
“I mean, what we’re doing, we’re just…”
Reys gave Def a light nudge as he trailed off. “Yeah, that’s right. We’re thieves. Taking food and water… and on top of that, trying to become deserters. But it’s those town folks who are in the wrong.” Reys kicked the wall and clicked his tongue. “They won’t even acknowledge us, yet they make us work like dogs. They don’t give us any food… That’s why we’re running away. Or are you going back?”
“There’s no way I could do that… something like that…”
“Then let’s go. Come on.”
“Hey, wait for me, big bro!”
Reys slung the plastic water tanks over both arms and dashed off into the darkness. With a voice on the verge of tears, Def ran after him. The two slipped through the inspection hatch of the water treatment plant and ran back into the underground tunnel. There, a six-wheeled truck was parked.
“Bro, you’re late. What the hell were you doing?”
“Shut up. It’s Def’s fault. You idiot…”
“Don’t call me an idiot. Even though I’m fat, I ran all the way here just fine.” Child soldiers were waiting on the truck’s flatbed. Packs of food, still unopened, were stacked high. Reys stowed the plastic containers of drinking water beside them.
“We’re all set to escape now. Let’s just head straight out of town.”
“But are you completely sure this is okay, bro-?” Def looked around at the darkness with a worried expression. “The guys from the school lunch program will notice us soon. What are we gonna do if they come after us..?”

“Wait, is that what you’re worried about?” Jam adjusted his crooked sunglasses and said, “The real problem is the Demon Gods, right? If we don’t get out of here fast, we’re gonna be their lunch. Right, bro?”
“Ah, yeah... you’re right...” Pretending to be calm, Reys climbs down from the truck bed. But Jam’s words sent a chill down his spine.
(This isn’t a joke... There’s no way I can fight for those guys anymore... After going through all that...)
The events of yesterday still lingered vividly in Reys’ mind. The cackling of the Blood Pact member he saw up close… And the color of the blood from those killed right before his eyes, the suffocating stench of entrails...
(It’s haunting me...) Kicking up mud, he climbed into the driver’s seat.
“Reys, you don’t look so good.” Rimuro was sitting in the passenger seat. As usual, she was hugging a puppy doll and smiling, completely oblivious.
“...Whatever. Just buckle up.”
“Yeah... Rimuro, I really want to go outside.” Shun said. He fastened his seatbelt with his tiny hands. “I'm already bored, Rimuro. I wish everyone else would come outside too.”
“Yeah, you're right...”
“What about big sis Roel? Rimuro, I want to go with her!”
“Nah, she’s not coming... It’s just us...”
“That’s no fun. Lord Justice isn’t coming either?”
For a moment, his hand wavered as he turned the key. Still, he started the engine. Reys turned on the headlights and stared intently at the end of the tunnel.
“....No, he’s not coming. Just shut up for a bit.”
“Well then, well then, what about Sen’gai’s big sister......”
“I told you to shut up!” He roared and floored the accelerator. As if fleeing from something, Reys drove the truck forward...... or so he thought.
“Wh-what the...!” The truck jolted violently. At the same time, the tires screeched with a high-pitched screech. Inside the cargo bed, the child soldiers began to stir.
“Hey, big bro! What’s the matter?”
“The truck isn’t moving at all…”
“Must be a flat tire. I’ll go check it out.” Saying that, one of the boys climbed down from the bed. Reys also stuck his head out the door window. And the moment he looked down at the truck...
“Schultz, get back!!” He suddenly shouted toward the rear. “Under the truck...!”
“Screeeeeeee!” Warnings and screams intertwined. His companions stared in shock at the boy... Schultz stood there, writhing in agony. Thick, blue-green tentacles were wrapped around both his legs. Slime-covered, they had round mouths at their tips. Rows of sharp fangs had already sunk into Schultz’s legs.
“Ah... big bro... help me...” Schultz reached out weakly - but the tentacles emerging from beneath the six-wheeler multiplied, wrapping themselves around Schultz one after another. They entangled his arms and began devouring his throat. He couldn’t even manage to break free from their grip. The boy’s face gradually turned black.
“Ah... big bro...” A torrent of fresh blood spurted from his mouth. As his bones snapped one by one, the boy sank into the vortex of tentacles.

(...Ahh...) The scream died in his throat. Still, without a moment's hesitation, Reys scooped up Rimuro and leaped out of the driver's seat. His companions all jumped down from the truck bed at once.
"It's a Demon God! Get out!"
"Grab your weapons!"
The truck overturned almost at the same moment, pushed up from below and slammed onto the aisle, it bounced two or three times. The shockwave sent the boys crawling to the floor.
"Reys!"
"Why is there a Demon God here?!" Reys turned around, still holding Rimuro. The six-wheeler was now nothing but scrap metal. Pushing aside the debris...
"......Zea Ha… Haze... Zea Ha...!"
"Run...!"
The young soldiers scattered in all directions. But the two who were too slow to escape were the first to be seized by tentacles.
"Ross! Garth!" Reys shouted, still holding Rimuro in his arms. He also clutched a sniper rifle in his hand, but at the sight of the Evil Spirit that had appeared, Reys couldn't even bring himself to pull the trigger.
"...Haze… Zea-Ha...!"
Eyes murky and stagnant. The frog-like evil god raised its four arms. Its entire body was covered in a toxic blue and black camouflage pattern. Countless writhing tentacles extended from its back, trembling unsteadily.
"Help me, big brooo!" A scream echoed through the underground tunnel – but Haze calmly withdrew his tentacles, swiftly wrapping them around the two young soldiers he had crushed. He lifted them up and shoved them into his slack, gaping maw. The Evil Spirit swallowed the blood-soaked corpses with relish.
"H-he ate Ross!" Def screamed from somewhere. His comrade was swallowed headfirst, his legs sucked into the monster's lips.
Reiz let out a cry of horror. "Aaaahhh...!"
"Reys! Please!"
He couldn't do anything for Rimuro, who was clinging to him.
But the Demon Lord suddenly released a torrent of acidic bodily fluid from the glands on his back. The liquid sprayed out like a shower, scattering all around.
"Gyaaaaaah!" A young soldier, drenched in the fluid, let out a bloodcurdling scream and writhed in agony. His skin melted away, exposing raw, red flesh.
(I'm going to die too...) The crimson of blood and flesh filled his vision. Suddenly, nausea welled up inside him - but he hadn't eaten enough to vomit. Reys writhed in agony as his stomach cramped.
"Bro! Run! What are you waiting for?!" Jam shouted, firing his gun wildly.
But he couldn't answer. Thrashing about in agony, Reys gritted his teeth.
"...Zea Ha… Haze... Zea Ha...!"
"Bro, I'm scared! Reys!"
Through his fading vision, the evil god was closing in. Countless writhing tentacles reached out from both sides. Reys apologized to Rimuro in his arms.
(I'm sorry... I couldn't protect you... I... guess this is who I really am... The truth is, I...)
"...Haze… Zea-Ha…!" Above him, the Evil God roared.

As if to challenge that voice...
“Run! Reys!” A voice of purity echoed through the underground tunnel.
The Evil Spirit turned its sleepy eyes toward the sound. Standing directly in front of it, Justice formed a holy seal. Waving his Holy War Staff, he shouted powerfully.
“First Strike! Circumventing Impact Bullet!” A flash of light burst from his fingertips. The power of the God of Creation exploded, soaring into the air and splitting into four - the bolts of lightning Justice unleashed darted and twisted, plunging into the Demon God’s mouth. All four thunderbolts detonated simultaneously.
“Zea-Ha, Zea-Ha!!!” The Demon God’s throat and abdomen were blown apart at once.
“Justice!” Def and Jam shouted in unison. Their voices brought Raise back to consciousness.
(Justice... no way...)
Fighting the pain, he sat up. But before him, the half-collapsed Evil God was writhing in agony. “Zea-Ha Zea-Ha… Zea-Ha, Zea-Ha…” The evil god, its eyeballs hanging limply, foamed at the mouth and ran wildly. Waving its tentacles about, it evaporated as if burning and melting away. All that remained was a black stain.
“Yay, it’s Lord Justice!” Rimuro leapt from Reys’s arms and ran over. Justice embraced her small body and let out sigh of relief.
“Are you okay, Rimuro? You hurt?”
“Yeah, Big Bro Reys protected me.” Hugging the dog doll, Rimuro said.
Justice looked around at the group. “Is everyone else okay too? Are you all right?”
“Man, that was close. Sorry about that!”
“I mean, you really are a Holy Warrior.” The young soldiers also let out sighs of relief.
Then, suddenly... he turned to look at Reys. He was the only one remaining silent. Keeping his eyes downcast, he slowly stood up. Reys glared at the blond boy.
“What the hell are you worried about…?”
“Reys…”
“Why the hell are you worried about me?! You know why I’m here, don’t you!” He looked down at Justice and roared at him. “We’re the ones who stole the food! We’re the ones who stole the water! You’ve got every right to be angry! But… it’s all because of those people in town!”
“Reys…”
“Ah, big bro…” Def and Jam tried to approach him but froze in place. Reys clenched both fists tightly. Tears fell onto those fists.
But ignoring them, Reys roared at the top of his lungs. “Even though we’ve been working so hard in the Volunteer Army… everyone looks down on us! They probably just think we should die at the hands of the Evil Spirits! And I guess that makes sense—back then, all we ever DID was fight!"
“..........”
Reys let out a self-deprecating laugh and clenched his fists. "That’s why I wanted to escape! I thought that if we joined the Volunteer Corps, the townspeople might start to respect us a little... but it was for nothing! I’m done fighting and dying for scum like that!”
The small Holy Warrior kept his head down. His clenched fists were trembling.
Seeing this, Def mustered his courage and stepped forward.
“This was a bad idea… Let’s go back to town…”

"I mean, we still have time..." Jam added in a quiet voice.

But Reys didn't stop his self-mockery. "You guys… think about it for a second. There's no way the townspeople are going to forgive us." He spat out the words. "People's grudges run deep... Once you lose their trust... there's no way to get it back!  It's a lost cause! Justice! You're a spoiled, rich kid! You wouldn't understand it!"

He kept yelling at Justice, who was looking down.  :In the end, I'm not some high-and-mighty volunteer soldier! I'm just... just a kid!  I'm nothing like you, I'm no Holy War Officer! I can't even properly fight against an Evil Spirit!"

He roared it all out in one breath… then shifted his gaze.

Traces of the Demon God still lingered nearby.

And scattered around them lay the remains of what had once been his comrades. Someone's arm, a leg… a twisted, unrecognizable pile of corpses… A wave of nausea he'd forgotten about surged up. Ignoring the stomach acid rising to his throat, he vomited it all out. Only now did fear make his body tremble. Gritting his teeth until they chattered, Reys knelt down where he stood.

“......I was scared...” He muttered, facing the cold floor. “The first time I saw that Blood Oath member… I… got scared… I started to hate fighting… I got scared of being killed!” Hugging his trembling body, Reys doubled over, gasping for breath. “I… I can’t do this anymore! I was scared of getting killed by the Evil Spirit right here! I can’t fight like you! That’s why I’m running away! Is that wrong? Is running away wrong, Justice?” He shouted and looked up. There…

“Ah…” Justice’s gaze met his. His light blue eyes cast a gentle glow. The moment their eyes met, the trembling vanished from Reys’s entire body. The pain faded, and his anger dissipated. Mysteriously, his heart began to calm. But what was truly strange was…

“Justice, you…”

It was a smile tinged with sadness. The light blue of his eyes seemed like a glacier. For a moment, he thought he saw a blizzard raging behind that smile. That harshness left Reys speechless.

“...Is it...... already over...?” Quietly, Justice spoke. He raised his face and repeated it once more. “...Is it really over now, Reys? All of this... Is it really impossible now...?" Justice still wore his usual smile. A carefree smile, full of hope. While maintaining that innocent smile... Tears streamed from his large eyes.

His eyes, which should have been aqua blue, became bloodshot. His face was a mess of tears.

“Everyone at the city… they’re not really that bad… Even if you make a mistake once, they’ll forgive you… You can definitely regain their trust… So, let’s go back… Let’s go back together… to your town…” He smiled at him with eyes swollen from crying.

Stunned, Reys could only stand there frozen. (Why… Why is he so... kind... Why does he care so much about...... us......)

He was supposed to be just a Holy Crusader. He was supposed to be just a boy.

But facing the Justice before him, he couldn’t find the words to say.

(Why... why... why...) Holding his breath, he shook his confused head...

Finally, Reys asked. “You… what on earth…”

The moment the words finally formed…

“Lord Justice!” Suddenly, Rimuro shouted.

But the Holy Warrior had already noticed something was wrong. “The Metalite…” The Holy Staff he held began to flash red light once more. Immediately afterward, countless gunshots echoed from inside the water treatment plant. Then, the alarm began to wail.

Somehow, the radio communication had been restored. “Justice! Do you hear me, Justice?!” Hearing Riot’s voice through his headphones, Justice wiped away his tears.

“I-I can hear you, Riott!”

“Great! Where are you right now? Come to the water treatment plant right away!” Behind her as she spoke rapidly, gunshots and strange, frenzied screams could be heard. “An evil spirit has invaded the water treatment plant! We’re short-handed—hurry over here!”

“Got it... Reys!” Justice turned and gave an over the shoulder look at Reys. “...I’m counting on you to look after Rimuro.”

With that, he started running without even looking back. Rimuro called out after him.
“Lord Justice!”
The young soldiers hesitated for a moment as Justice ran off. But...
“Bro, we’re going too...”
“Let’s go together...”
But Reize remained silent, his lips pressed tightly together. “But, I...” A sniper rifle lay on the ground beside him. But he couldn’t bring himself to touch it. He was too terrified to even hold the gun.
However...
“I’m going!” Suddenly, Rimuro picked up the sniper rifle. “I’m going with Lord Justice!” She declared to everyone with a serious look in her eyes. Holding it close to her chest, she suddenly started running.
“You idiot, Rimuro, where are you going?!” In a panic, Reys chased after the girl.
Def and the others followed, rushing out into the hallway. “Come back, Rimuro! Wait for us!” Her footsteps faltered as she charged headlong into the midst of gunfire and screams.

“Zo-gu-og! Ze-gura! Zo-gu-og!” The evil god that had appeared at the water treatment plant continued to scream relentlessly.
The volunteers’ voices were breaking under the weight of the screams that shook the facility. “Call for reinforcements immediately!” He pleaded repeatedly over the city-wide communication system. “The demon has breached the double barrier! We can’t hold out any longer...!”
“Roel and Bauser are on their way right now!” Hayate shouted back from the other end of the intercom. “Justice should be heading out ahead of them too! Hold out until they get here!”
But the soldier never heard that voice. Before he knew it, the Evil Spirit had closed in behind him. Before he could even scream, he was crushed. The arm clutching the intercom was torn off and fell to the floor.
“You’re running wild!” Riot swung her prosthetic left arm. The three gun barrels, still firing, were already red-hot. Yet she reloaded them with fresh, heavy magazines. “Everyone, get out of here fast!
“Continue full-auto fire. Automatic target tracking. Locked in until further notice.”
She pushed the attacking soldiers back and closed in on the Demon God. With a deafening roar, the 5.56mm triple-barreled machine gun opened fire. Zodanium armor-piercing rounds tore through the Demon God’s massive body at an angle.
“Zo-gu-og! Ze-Gura! Zo-Gu-Og!” The demon god let out a muffled groan - but its charge did not stop. As the Evil Spirit advanced, slipping on the blood on the floor, Riot looked up at it intently.
“You’re a tough one, aren’t you...”
It must have been five meters in diameter. The demon god’s body was a bluish-black sphere. Countless blood vessels bulged from its surface, and hundreds of eyeballs stared out from open eyelids. Furthermore, from the gaps between them, dozens of wrinkled human hands protruded and writhed. That colossal form had already mowed down more than forty soldiers. Severed limbs lay scattered all around.

A cry of frustration echoed through the carnage. “What have you done!” Justice, who had rushed to the scene, shouted. The boy clutching the Holy War Staff also looked up, glaring at the Demon God’s massive form. “Is that the Demon Lord Gu Og?!”
“Justice, you’re here!” Riot locked eyes with her partner. The demon god’s combat data flashed frantically across her retinas. The magical energy output emitted by the Evil Spirit exceeded four hundred.
“Be careful! This one’s a tough opponent!”
Before anyone could say a word, Justice leapt back. The Demon Lord Gu Og had begun charging forward, rolling his spherical body as it went. Pillars shattered, and desks flew apart.
“One after another, it never ends...!”
“Zog U-og! Ze-Glar Zog-Og!”
Riot spun his triple-barreled gun at full speed, spent shell casings spilled onto the floor in a flood. The Zodanium armor-piercing rounds pierced the demon god’s eyeballs and blew off his arms. But the charge didn’t stop. Instead, countless fingertips gathered evil power and slammed it all at once into Riot.
“Aaaargh!” Countless ice blasts struck the area around Riot. The floor exploded and shattered with loud booms. The sharp shards of ice that flew off mercilessly sliced through Riot’s skin.
“Staining my perfect skin...!” Shouting in rage, Riot charged forward. She leaped boldly, clearing the Evil Spirit. The Evil Spirit, having lost its target, came to an abrupt halt.
Behind it, Riot reattached her prosthetic arm and drew the greatsword from her back. “I’ll cut you to pieces! Brace yourself!”
Once again, like a storm, ice projectiles rained down all around. Explosive smoke obscured her vision, and shrapnel rained down on the Battle Armor Demon like a torrential downpour.
“You think I’m going to die from some puny pellets like that?!” Wielding the twin swords of the swordsmith Zauer in both hands, Riot slashed diagonally across the Evil Spirit.
A severed arm flew through the air, striking the wall with a sickening thud. Yet the hail of bullets did not cease.
“Riot! We can’t stay here!” Justice shouts as she dodges the shrapnel. “If the facility gets damaged, there’s no telling what’ll happen! Lure him into the underground tunnels!”
“Got it!” She yelled and dashed back in front of the Demon God.
Gu Og tracked Riot’s movements with his countless eyes. He swayed slightly and tried to close in from behind the Battle Armor Demon.
“That’s right! Just follow me like a good boy, you clumsy oaf!” She slashed at the advancing Evil Spirit, halting his advance. She retreated a little further and slashed again, executing a clever evasive maneuver.
Justice, though heading in a different direction, also hurried toward the facility’s exit. Right before his eyes…
“Lord Justice!”
“Rimuro, don’t go here!” Suddenly, a girl clutching a sniper rifle ran toward them. Justice panicked and tried to push Rimuro back.

But from behind...
“You stay hidden, Rimuro!”
“Reys!”
Reys, who had caught up, scooped Rimuro up. He quickly snatched the sniper rifle and shoved the girl onto his back.
“Hey, I’m fighting too!”
“Don’t be ridiculous! You’re in Justice’s way!” Saying that, he turned back to the blond boy. “You get the miracle ready! We’ll buy you some time!”
“Reys......!”
“Zo-Gu-Og!  Zegura! Zo-Gu-Og!” The massive form of Gu Og, advancing forward, came into view. At the same time, the young soldiers caught up to the scen
“What the hell is that?! Gross!”
Reys quickly glanced at his comrades who had rushed over.
“Jam and the others, get the rockets ready! Def’s squad, move to the front line! Keep firing until we’re ready! Got it?!”
“Got it, big bro!”
“Reys, but it’s dangerous!”
“Rimuro! You stay hidden over there!”
The young soldiers formed a formation behind the rubble and opened fire. Justice formed the Sacred Seal and concentrated his thoughts. Trusting Reys and the others, he remained completely unguarded. Reys also loaded a bullet into his sniper rifle.
But...
(Damn it, I’m shaking...) The Evil Spirit’s screams made his arms shake at the shoulders. A Zodanium round slipped through his fingers and fell to the ground. He picked it up, only to drop it again. (My body won’t do what I tell it to—it’s pathetic. Don’t mess with me… don’t you dare…!) As he cursed myself inwardly, his comrades had already formed a double line.
“Bro! We’re ready!” Jam hoisted a shoulder-fired multi-purpose rocket launcher onto his back. His comrades loaded the rounds.
Watching their movements, Reys suppressed a shudder and shouted: “Don’t hold back! Blow it to smithereens!”
The roar of the launch was followed by a shockwave. The Zodanium warhead plunged into the Demon God’s colossal body and exploded deep within. At the same time, a massive amount of bodily fluid sprayed out into the surrounding area.
“Zo-Gu-Og! Ze-Gura! Zo-Gu-Og!”
“Good job, we did it!”
Seeing Gu Og’s body lurching heavily to one side, Riot readied herself for the finishing blow - but before she could act, Justice unleashed a blinding flash from his holy seal.
“Divine Inferno Strike!” Justice summoned an ancient sacred script in the shape of a triangle at the Demon God’s feet. The glow of the script stretched toward the ceiling, forming a divine triangular pillar. Fierce infernal flames rained down upon the Demon God, trapped within that pillar. Screaming in agony, Gu Og desperately tried to escape.
“Zo-Gu-Og! Ze-Gura Zo-Gu-Og!”

“Th... That's amazing...” The young soldiers stared in stunned silence at the Evil Spirit being consumed by the flames.

But Justice, his eyes wide, had instantly noticed the change in the demon. “No, run!” He turned and shouted at Reize. “That Evil Spirit is gonna...!”

“Justice, get down!”

“Reys!!!”

Countless screams intermingled.

Right before their eyes, the evil spirit’s body swelled up in an instant. Countless cracks ran across the surface of the sphere. Explosion, flames, a vortex of sounds. The evil spirit Lord Gu Og self-detonated, turning into a gigantic fireball. A massive maelstrom of flames shattered the miracle and threatened to swallow the boys whole in an instant.

“Justice! Reys!”

Even Riott, who had been closing in, flinched involuntarily.

Walls crumbled, and water pipes burst. Fiber-cement collapsed in an avalanche. The explosion resonated so deeply it shook the dark underground tunnel.

“What the...!” Roel, who was running, was the first to notice.

Next, Bauser pointed ahead. “That’s it, look!”

It should have been the entrance to the water treatment plant, but its thick armored shutter burst open from the inside with a deafening roar. A torrent of flames surged into the underground tunnel all at once.

“Roel! Get down”

“Aaaaaaah!”

Ducking to avoid the heat and shockwave, the volunteer army members hit the floor. A heat wave swept over their heads in an instant. As the blast receded, Roel bravely raised her head.

“W-what was that?!” A figure flickered into view where she was looking. Def, Jam... one by one, the young soldiers emerged from the black smoke, all of them staggering. Covered in soot, one of the boys collapsed onto the tunnel floor.

“What on earth is going on?!” Roel rushed over and caught Def in her arms. But the boy, his face blackened, could only cough.

“I-inside... Reys… Big bro…”

“What did you say?!”

“Justice and… Big Sis too…”

At those finally squeezed-out words, Roel went pale. Bauser, who had rushed over, also frantically turned his gaze toward the water supply plant. “Justice! Riott!” But the plant was already engulfed in flames. The billowing black smoke seemed endless. The sound of water from the activated sprinklers drowned out his cries.

Still, Roel stood up and shouted hoarsely toward the flames.

“Justice! Reys! Answer me!”

Finally, the two boys appeared. Reys was supporting Justice by the shoulder, practically dragging him along. As soon as they recognized Roel’s face, the two let out a chorus of relieved sighs.

“Roel, you came after all…”

“I’m so glad everyone’s safe…”

After confirming his comrades were there, Reys smiled. Then, he collapsed onto the floor.
"Reys, hold on! Justice!" Roel shook the two boys. The volunteer soldiers surrounded the two, who had exhausted all their strength.
Only Bauser remained, still facing the flames. "Riot! Are you there, Riot?"
"Lady… Riot…" Roel looked up as well.
There, the shadow of the Battle Armor Demon appeared, swaying slightly. Her cloak was burning, and his skin was scorched. But she didn't care. Holding the small body close, Riot had escaped from the searing heat.
"…I'm sorry, everyone..." Looking down at the girl in her arms, Riot murmured. "…I failed…"
"Rimuro!" Roel covered her mouth with both hands.
At that name, Reys also sat up. "No way, Rimuro... Rimuro!"
Riot laid the little girl down in front of Reys who was rushing toward her. In her left hand, she clutched the charred remains of her dog plushie. Rimuro's entire body was covered in severe burns.
"Big... brother... Reys... big brother..." She reached out her right hand, trembling.
Snatching her hand and gripping it tightly, Reys called out to her, almost screaming. "I'm right here! Don't die, Rimuro! Open your eyes! You can't die! Rimuro!"
"That's right! Don't die, Rimuro!"
"Open your eyes, Rimuro!"
The young soldiers clung to her as well.
Roel knelt down and called out desperately. "Hang in there, Rimuro! I'll treat you right away! So don't die! You absolutely mustn't die!"
But Bauser shook his head with a pained expression. The gathered soldiers let out cries of despair.
"...Big sis..." It seemed as though Rimuro had smiled.
Roel desperately swallowed a violent sob.
But Reys hadn't given up.
"Justice!" He turned around and shouted at him. "You're a Holy Warrior, aren't you! Work a miracle! Save this guy! You can do it! You... You can do at least that much!" He shouted it all at once, and then he realized.
Justice had already formed the Holy Seal. The blond-haired boy approached Rimuro and gently clasped his small hand. Then, with his usual smile.
"Final Strike..."
Startled, Riot stiffened. "Justice, no...!"
"Life Transfer Healing..." The quiet incantation echoed through the tunnel.
A sacred light emanating from Justice's hand enveloped Rimuro's body. The burns vanished, and his weak breathing gradually returned.
"Lord Justice..." She looked up with wide eyes, then smiled.
Justice nodded happily in return. "I'm glad... I was worried..."
As soon as he finished speaking, he collapsed.
"Justice!" Startled, Roel caught the boy in his arms.
Suddenly, his face was bathed in a red light. And then... Everyone was stunned.
"…Ju… Stice…" Roel's voice trembled as hse spoke to the unconscious Holy Warrior. Reys shuddered, his back quivering.

*Snatching Justice from Roel, Riot embraced him protectively.*

An ominous heretical symbol had appeared on the back of Justice's hand. A vow of loyalty to the Dark God.
The Blood Oath Mark... it glowed red.
"Justice, you...?" Roel asked, her lips trembling. Of course, there was no answer. Instead...
"Lady Riot!" Roel let out a scream.
The Battle Armor Demon's arm reached out and snatched Justice from Roel's grasp.
"Riot…" Roel clenched her now-empty hand.
Right before her eyes, Riot was holding her partner close. With a steely gaze… biting her lip…
Roel stared straight into those eyes.
Everyone fell silent, gazing intently at the two of them.
It was a moment so long it felt like an eternity.

## 【Chapter 4: Weimar / Imprisonment】

"It can't be… There's no way!.." Bogdanov clawed at the darkness. "Why does the Holy Warrior bear that mark...! Why... does it signify supreme power... The heretical emblem of the Evil God Emperor, Lucifer...!" The Blood Pact members raged with jealousy.
That mark was undoubtedly proof that he had been granted absolute power by the evil Supreme God. That power—said to scatter the constellations, obscure the sun, shift continents, and drain the seas... the ultimate brand that every Blood Pact member craved, yet no one had ever obtained.
"It must be some kind of mistake… Answer me… Answer me, my Lord...!"
The pitch-black darkness exhaled as if trembling. The leader of the Bogdanov Coven began to tremble slightly, as if in fear.
"Eg... Ngai Veil... Egleg... Ngai Veil…"
"That's absurd!" Releasing his thoughts, Bogdanov raised his voice. "So you're saying he's the one! Justice… he…"
Just as he was about to call out... the darkness shook violently. With a growl, the alternate dimension began to tear apart. Something immense stepped through the rift without hesitation. At the same moment, Bogdanov's thoughts were squeezed tight, and a fierce, searing pain raced through his entire body. "Oaaaaah!"
"Not another word, Bogdanov." Suddenly, a new thought burst into the darkness. "Do not question the actions of the Evil God Emperor… Even if a wretch like you tries his best to speculate, you'll understand nothing…" The thought manifested as a distorted human figure.
With an oppressive voice, the thought toyed with Bogdanov. "Stepping out of line will only earn you disfavor. Don't bother. Win your own battle instead."
Bogdanov trembled. A colossal power had manifested before his eyes. And the possessor of that power was none other than...
"Do you know who he is!? Who is Justice… Do you know?!" The moment he shouted, excruciating pain struck his body once more.

As Bogdanov writhed in agony, the new thought spoke quietly. "There are some things better left unknown… And even if you knew, there is nothing you could do about it…" The new thought let out a roar of laughter. Bogdanov continued to scream.
Even the Demon Lord N'gai Veil remained silent for now.

"Why won't you believe me?!" She had shouted this over and over, and Riot's voice was now barely a whisper. Still, she slammed her fist down on the table at the Joint Operations Headquarters once more and screamed. "He's not a Blood Pact member! He has repelled the Evil Spirits countless times! Are you saying that was all just an act?!"
"I guess I can't blame you for thinking that." Resting his feet on the table littered with maps, Bauser spoke with an air of exasperation. "What appeared on Justice's hand was the mark of the heretical sect… the emblem of the Blood Pact. Isn't that proof he made a pact with the Evil Spirit? Anyone would be suspicious of that." He said this as he puffed on his cigarette.
Riot looked around.
Hayate remained seated, silent. The volunteer soldiers all fixed suspicious glances on Riot.
"That's right... We're actually suspicious of you, too. That you're a minion of the Evil God..." One officer confessed honestly. "There's no end to the suspicions... The story about breaking through the encirclement was fishy from the start, and the attack on the water supply plant... Some say that was your doing, too..."
"So you think I'm a spy."
"It's only natural to think so..." Hayate muttered, his eyes closed.
The Battle Armor Demon fell silent for a moment, then exhaled deeply. "That kid is a bona fide Holy War Officer... You've seen him use miracles countless times, haven't you?"
"Then why does he have the Heretical Crest..."
"That's exactly what I want to know!" She slammed her fist on the table, cutting off Bauser's voice. Riot's voice trembled with frustration. "Even he himself doesn't understand... It only appears when he uses a miracle three times… But it's not his fault! Justice is innocent!" Saying this, the Battle Armor Demon looked at Roel.
The girl-commander was staring intently at Riot. Expressing anguish, Roel slowly rose from her seat. "Anyway... Justice will have to stay in the dungeon for a while... Because the unrest is spreading not just among the Volunteer Army, but among the entire citizenry."
News travels fast through the grapevine. The fact that the Heretical Mark had appeared on Justice's hand had spread to twelve thousand people within a few hours. The Joint Operations Headquarters was flooded with citizens demanding the immediate execution of Justice and Riot.
"Kill the traitor!"
"Let us avenge our families!"
Even if they cried out their innocence, it was all in vain.
"Then throw me in the dungeon too..." Riot snapped at Roel. "If you suspect me, throw me in there with him! Why just Justice?!"

“Riot!” Their gazes locked. A piercing stare met with a look of confusion. But almost immediately, Roel couldn’t bear it and looked away.
In her place, Bauser spoke up. “Don’t be ridiculous. We don’t have the luxury of keeping a fighter like you sitting idle in a cell. You, too... Everyone’s suspicious of you... but we’ll lock you up after the battle. That’s the decision.”
“Do you really suspect him, Bauser?” Riot fixed the mercenary with a piercing stare. “Do you really think Justice is a Blood Oath member? Do you think we should… execute Justice too?”
“Of course I do.” Bauser replied curtly. “The heretical crest is proof of being a Blood Pact member. It’s proof that he’s the enemy. What else am I supposed to do besides execute him?”
Without a moment’s hesitation, Riot lunged at him, grabbing Bauser by the collar and dragging him off the chair. She raised her clenched fist, ready to smash it into the mercenary’s face.

“Stop it, both of you!” Roel’s scream stopped the blow at the last second.
But Bauser flashed a smirk at the Battle Armor Demon straddling him. “What, gonna kill me, Riot? Is that who you really are?”

Silently, she stepped away from Bauser. Riot then lent a hand to the mercenary, helping the giant to his feet. "Justice saved everyone. Right in front of everyone's eyes… even Rimuro…"
"Spies are good actors, after all." Standing up, Bowser said, "If that's not the case, then you'd kill that Blood Oath member - Bogdanov. Letting him escape was just an act too… Some people say that, you know."
"Anyway, everyone, take your positions..." In a weary voice, Hayate brought order to the room. "Bowser, you take your position too. With Justice gone, our combat strength is in a precarious state. Hurry and reinforce the First Battalion's positions..."
"Aye, aye..." Rising from his chair, the mercenary stubbed out his cigarette. "Well, don't take it personally. It just means you need to fight and win. That is, if you can manage it."
"Bauser!" Roel snapped at the mercenary who had mocked Riot.
The volunteer soldiers left the Joint Operations Headquarters, their hearts filled with doubt. The three who remained slowly exchanged glances.
"It can't be helped, Lady Riot…" Saying this, Roel bit her lip. It was a decision the young gunner had reached after her own internal struggle. Persuading twelve thousand people to suppress their killing intent was simply beyond her capabilities at the moment.
"In any case, it's the best course of action under the current circumstances." Hayate spoke emotionlessly. "Justice's execution is still some time away. He won't face vigilante justice from the citizens. He's safe." He let out an unusually short sigh. Riot looked straight back at the strategist who had delivered the news.
"Hayate, you too..."
"That's enough... Return to the First Battalion. The enemy's attack isn't over yet." He turned on his heel and plunged back into the sea of scattered battle maps. If anything, the pallor of his profile seemed to deepen.
Facing that resolute back, Roel lowered her gaze slightly. A chill unlike the cold of the air began to drift through the surroundings.
(I have no choice but to do this...) As if to shake off the tense atmosphere, Riot cracked her knuckles. (Against that Bogdanov... I just have to win... I'll stake my life on it and clear our name.) Riot vowed this to herself.
"Ah..." Opening the door to the command post, Riot suddenly stopped in her tracks. Roel collided with her from behind.
"Sorry, Riot... uh..."
"Oh, uh..." At the exit of the command post, Reys was leaning against the wall. All alone, with a strangely solemn expression on his face.
"What are you doing, Reys? Looking for someone?"
"Well, not exactly looking for anyone…"
"I'm heading back to the unit."
Riot tried to walk past casually. At that movement, Reys stiffened. "Justice… what's gonna happen to him?"
Riot stopped and turned around. For a moment, their eyes met, but the boy couldn't help but look away.
"What do you mean, 'what's going to happen'… nothing's been decided yet…"
"Are they going to execute him?"

Faced with that direct question, Roel forced a smile. “Personally speaking… I don’t want to… because I believe in him…”
“I see…”
“Are you worried about Justice…?”
“N-no, not really…!” Reys denied it, sounding irritated. “B-but... he did help Rimuro... so...”
“Yeah...” Roel brushed her blonde hair back and smiled. “Justice must have thought, ‘I don’t care if my secret is exposed, I still want to save Rimuro,’ right? I just can’t believe someone like that is a Blood Oath member...”
She said, shifting her gaze to Riot.
The Battle Armor Demon, still tense, stared intently at Reys.
“By the way, how’s Rimuro doing?”
“Oh, don’t worry about her… She’s out there playing with everyone else…”
“Don’t go playing around with six-wheeled trucks on your own anymore. If you do it again, we’ll court-martial you.” At Roel’s words, Reys stiffened for a moment. He cast a fearful glance at Riot as well. Then, as if he’d made up his mind…
“Um, listen...”
“Go see him, Reys.” Suddenly, Riot cut him off.
“Ah, Sis...”
“Go see Justice. You’re worried about him, aren’t you? They should let you talk to him for a little bit.”
“Uh, yeah... If it’s Reys, then...” Unaware of anything, Roel offered. “That’s fine. I’ll talk to the guards myself.”
Reys bit his lip, hesitating over something - then he looked up at Riot boldly.
“Aren’t you going to see him...?”
“I can’t.” Riot replied naturally. “They think I’m in cahoots with Justice. If I go to the dungeon, they’ll definitely suspect me even more.”
“Y-yeah, you’re right...”
“I’m sorry, Riot…”
“It’s okay. It’s not your fault, Roel. Besides, I’ve got things to do…” Saying that, she tapped the large pistol at her waist. “The new recruits are waiting. The decisive battle is just around the corner, so we’ve got to give it our all.”
Clenching his fist, Reys fell silent. He hung his head, his profile looking almost pained.
But Roel gave the boy a gentle smile. “Hurry, Reys.”
“Sorry…” He said briefly, then turned his back. And suddenly, he started running down the hallway.
Roel, clutching her papers, let out a sigh. “That’s strange. He doesn’t seem like his usual self.”
Silently, Riott also turned his back. (I won’t help him... He has no choice but to face this alone...For the kindness Justice has shown to me... For the trial Justice gave me...) Her coat fluttering behind her, Riot also stepped out onto the battlefield.

The blizzard shook the dungeon to its core. A bone-chilling cold seeped from the brick walls. Icicles were even beginning to form in the corner of the cell.
“It’s so cold… here…” Justice blew on his hands - a faint warmth spread through his palms. There was nothing left in those hands.

They were supposed to be his own hands. The boy, who had been stroking the hands that tormented him, suddenly looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps.

“Meal time, Justice...” A guard called out from beyond the iron bars - but the one holding the meal tray was a young soldier with dark skin.

“Reys...”

“Fifteen minutes only, mind you. I’m timing you.”

“Yeah, I know...” Nodding to the guard who was laying down the law, Reys stayed put. Through the small window, he passed in some substitute bread and soup without any meat.

But Justice didn’t even glance at the food; instead, he crawled toward the iron bars.

“Reys, you came after all!”

“Eat first. Even if it stinks, it’s still food.” As he urged, Reys suddenly let out a snicker. “Don’t worry, I didn’t steal this.” The self-deprecating words slipped out before he could stop them.

But Justice’s gaze was unwavering. With his clear, sky-blue eyes, he looked straight at Reys. “I’m happy. Thank you, Reys…”

“I owe you for saving me, too. And for my friends and Rimuro…” Saying that, he pointed at the bowl. Nodding, Justice took a sip of soup as well. As the warmth spread through his stomach, the blond boy broke into a smile.

“It’s delicious, Reys…”

“Hah, look at that carefree face of yours. Out there, everyone’s suspicious of you and making a huge fuss.”

At those words, the shadow of fear flickered across Justice’s smile. A pitiful, faint flicker, hiding his fear. “Can’t be helped, I guess. Everyone’s anxious.”

Reys said brusquely. “Everyone wants to know about you. Why… you know. Even I… I want to know…”

“Reys…” Justice set his spoon down on his plate.

The young soldier plucked up the courage to continue. “You… what happened? Why do you have the Heretical Crest? You could at least tell me that much.”

Justice tried to shake off the shadow. He bravely regained his smile and began to speak in a whisper. “I don’t know either... why...

“........”

“My father, who was a Holy War Officer, left one day... taking his men with him to the South Pole. He didn’t say what his purpose was. But I believe he went to slay an Evil Spirit.”

“And your father...”

“Yeah, even now, two years later... he hasn’t come back.” He said this while staring at his own toes. “If he went to defeat the Evil Spirit and died... well, that’s just how it goes. He was a Holy Crusader, after all.”

“So that wasn’t it?”

Nodding, the blond boy exhaled. “Right after Dad disappeared, contact suddenly cut off from the Twelve Cities near the South Pole. When the New Continent Crusaders rushed over, 1.2 million citizens were gone. They’d vanished.”

But Reys swallowed hard and let his thoughts wander. “I’ve heard that story before… but what does that have to do with your dad…?”

“There were no residents left, but at the gates of each of the twelve cities… the severed heads of Holy Knights and Holy War Officers were on display…” Justice smiled again. “They were all… my father’s subordinates.”

“…!”

Before a speechless Reys, Justice held out both hands. “The Holy Church is hiding the truth, though. Ever since then, on the back of my hand too… the mark of heresy has appeared. If I summon a miracle three times—the limit—then… they appear, like yesterday.”

Reys was at a loss for words. The story was too immense; he could only stare in stunned silence. He looked at Justice standing beside him once more. He began to feel as though Justice were some kind of terrifying presence.

“You… who the hell are you, anyway…?”

“I don’t know either. But I’m… a Holy War Officer. I’m definitely not a Blood Pact Member.” Gradually gathering his strength, Justice said. Some members of the Twelve Pope Council think my father fell into the ranks of the Blood Pact Members. Some even thinks that I’m... a sacrifice of some sorts. But I don’t believe any of that.”

“…….”

“I can summon miracles. The Creator God still... recognizes me. That’s why... I’m a Holy Warrior.” Justice’s usual smile returned, and he clenched his little fist. “I’ve… been under suspicion for the past two years. I’m used to it by now. But someday, I want to clear up that suspicion… the suspicion surrounding me and my dad…”

“Do you… really think you can clear it up?”

“Yeah, of course.” Justice said it without a care in the world. “Because I believe in my dad.”

“Was he a good father, then?”

“Yeah... I respected him.” He smiled and pulled a worn notebook from his waist. On the cover was written “The Book of Eisen.” – “Dad handed this to me before he left... It’s a massive record of all the evil gods and Blood Pact members he fought up until then.”

“...........”

“I’m sure Dad was prepared to die... that’s why he entrusted this to me. But even if he’s dead... I still have to clear up this doubt myself. Well, I’ve ended up back in Saxon for now.” He smiled wryly.

But Reys couldn’t laugh. “Why did you come back to Saxon?” Reys asked in an angry voice. “For you... isn’t this an important journey to find your father? You’re trying to clear up your own doubts, right? So... why... did you go out of your way to come back here?” He looked straight at Justice. “Aren’t you taking the long way around?”

“Yeah, Riot told me that too.”

“There are other Holy Warriors. You could just leave it to someone else, couldn’t you?”

“Yeah, I was told that too. But...” The young Holy Warrior scratched his head and gave a shy smile. “…I just couldn’t leave him behind.”

It was a bewildering answer. To put an important journey on hold just for that reason…

“…You’re such an idiot.” Reys declared it with a tone of exasperation. “You really are… an idiot. A total, absolute idiot… An endlessly huge idiot.”

"That's pretty harsh…" Seeing Justice pout slightly, the young soldier gathered his courage and began to speak.
"...But… you see…"
"Reys, time's up!" Suddenly, the rigid guard's voice rang out. "Visiting hours are over. Get back to your posts!"
The two boys locked eyes. Reys nodded firmly first. "I'll be back..."
"Reys...!"
"I... I believe in you!" Shouting briefly to Justice, Reys dashed out into the hallway. His spirit had returned to every extremity of his body. It was a feeling he had never experienced before.

"Are you sure?" Roel, who had rushed in, asked urgently.
The communications officer, having removed his headphones, nodded vigorously. "No doubt about it! The signal is weak, but it's repeating the same transmission at regular intervals!"
Roel also pressed her headphones to her ears and listened intently to the faint transmission. The communications officers all turned their attention to her expression.
"Roel, is it really… !"
Riot and Hayate burst into the cramped communications room a moment later. Nodding to the two of them, Roel flicked the switch on the speaker with her finger. Instantly, the external transmission began to fill the room.
"Weimar, come in... This is the Third Papal Regiment... Repeating, this is the Third Papal Regiment... Currently facing the horde of evil spirits in the Fulda Gorge... Operation to relieve Weimar is ongoing... Repeating, the relief operation..."
Static cut off the transmission. Roel slammed her fist into her palm. "Reinforcements have arrived! It's the New Continent Crusaders!"
The communications officers cheered. But before they could celebrate together, Roel hurriedly pulled a map from his chest. "The Fulda Gorge is the road leading to the neighboring satellite city of Remazen. It's about... sixteen kilometers to the east."
"Have you pinpointed the exact transmission source?"
"No, not yet." The communications officer replied to Hayate's question. "It would be possible if we lifted communications restrictions… but in that case, there's a risk of interception."
"What's interception got to do with anything at this point?" Snorting derisively, Riot reached for the communications console. She opened a section of the panel, pulled out a cable, and plugged it into the back of her neck. It was a universal connection plug. "We can pinpoint the source in three minutes. In the meantime..."
"Understood. I'll gather the battalion commanders, including Bauser. We need to inform them of the situation." As Roel nodded, the communications officers scrambled back to their stations in a panic. Seeing their frantic activity, Hayate forced a smile onto his pale face.
"If communication is possible… Roel, please contact the Papal Regiment. You are the representative of Weimar, after all."
"Yes… Is it… okay if I do it now?" She looked at Hayate as if seeking confirmation.

“We don’t have to make everyone endure this any longer... do we? Soon... this siege... will be over, won’t it?”
“That’s what we’re here to discuss!” The Battle Armor Demon thrust her thumb out from her clenched fist. “The Weimar relief operation is about to begin. Things are going to get busy... tell everyone that.” A hint of vigor was beginning to return to Riot’s voice.

“Silence!” Roel shouted from the podium of the underground council chamber.
The gallery was lined with prominent officers of the Volunteer Army, and the murmuring continued. Even soldiers who had been relieved of their guard duty and were supposed to be resting had gathered around those officers. And beyond that, crowds of citizens were spilling out into the aisles and lining the walls. It was difficult to contain their mounting anticipation, and the murmurings showed no sign of abating.
“At present, the relief forces have reached the Fulda Gorge. Their numbers total approximately twenty-seven thousand!” At Roel’s words, the murmurings turned into a roar.
But she pressed on regardless. “With the Third Papal Regiment of 3,000 as the core, two mobile divisions from our own Lebenburg are providing support. Both are advancing from our nation’s capital, Lebenburg, and are expected to reach Weimar as early as tomorrow!” She pointed to the map displayed behind her.
At that moment, the citizens let out a jubilant scream.
“They’re coming! Reinforcements are coming!”
“The siege will end tomorrow!”
Countless expressions of joy were exchanged all around, and a sigh of relief spread through the council chamber.
But Roel turned around and cut through the cheers with a stern voice. “However, the relief forces have encountered fierce resistance and have halted their advance!” This time, she pounded the map with her fist. Her sharp rebuke silenced the assembly. “The Demon Lord N’gai Veil—he highest-ranking demon god in this battle, who controls the Blood Pact member Bogdanov. It is said he has spawned dozens of Count-rank and Knight-rank evil spirits to mount a defensive line. Even against the elite Papal Regiment, a hard-fought battle is inevitable. However,” the young gunner said, pounding the podium. “We cannot just sit here and wait for help. The Third Papal Regiment is also requesting that the Weimar Volunteer Corps launch a counterattack from within the encirclement!”
She let out a sigh, her voice heavy with anguish. “Tomorrow morning, we will use an elite unit to break through the lines and attack the horde of evil spirits in the Fulda Gorge from behind!  It will be nearly impossible to return alive. Therefore, I will not force anyone! Only volunteers, please step forward!”
“I’ll go!”
“Let me go too!”
Countless fists were raised powerfully toward the sky.
In an instant, the chamber was filled with raised hands.
“I appreciate your enthusiasm, everyone. But I can’t let all of you go. Those who remain in Weimar also have duties to fulfill.” Hayate, leaning on his katana-turned-staff,

ascended to the podium. He spoke as if to calm the still-excited assembly. "The Blood Pact will likely launch a final attack before reinforcements arrive. We must lie in wait and crush that attack. Therefore..." The military strategist pointed to a map of the underground levels. "The garrison will be tasked with defending the mine. We have no spare capacity to defend elsewhere. Tomorrow morning, all citizens will also be moved to the mine."

"..........." Roel gazed at Hayate with concern.

Certainly, a mining facility with countless tunnels could accommodate twelve thousand citizens. But Hayate spoke quietly, his voice resonating. However, because it was the deepest part of Weimar, there was no place to flee. It was a dangerous strategy.

"The enemy must be desperate as well..." He squeezed out the words, as if to silence the cheers. "Tomorrow, they will surely attack the mine. We have no choice but to meet them with the full force of our volunteer army…... That—will be the moment of our victory!"

Roel pounded the podium with force. "Everything will be decided in one day! Get ready. That's all!"

A roar of cheers shook the chamber. Defensive works were rushed into action.

Weimar's twelve-tiered underground complex housed the mine at its deepest level. While there were countless access routes to the mine, Hayate had sealed off every single one, narrowing the entry points down to three gates. The entire Volunteer Army—four combat battalions—was deployed at vantage points overlooking those gates.

Defensive positions utilizing the rubble were also constructed. The sacred defensive formations drawn by Justice were cut out along with the floors and walls and deployed around the mine - all of this was done to limit the possible routes of entry. They could not afford to be caught off guard again by an evil spirit whose approach was unpredictable. Preparations to lure it out and lie in wait were steadily progressing.

"Please tell me why." Turning around, Roel asked. "Why can't I go?"

"I thought you understood…" After supervising the construction work, Hayate stepped out into the cold corridor and muttered with a sigh. "You are the commander-in-chief of the Volunteer Army. I can't let you join the breakthrough unit."

"Why not?" Walking alongside him, Roel exhaled a puff of white breath and asked. "Whether I stay with the garrison or join the breakthrough unit, I'll die when my time comes. So I'd rather... volunteer for the more dangerous option...!"

"Lady Roel..." They gazed at each other, and he slowly turned his resolve into words. "Up until now, as a commander... I have sent many people into the line of fire. In the end, I myself should be the one to go into the line of fire. You've been in the line of fire all along. Everyone knows that... Besides, there's the future to consider. When victory dawns, you should be involved in the reconstruction as well." Hayate slowly pushed open the heavy iron door.

They reached the center of the Power Plant District "I think everyone understands that, too." It was the door to the First Ammunition Depot.

In front of the rows of containers, soldiers who had already been selected for the assault unit were gathering in a crowd. Each was fully focused on inspecting their weapons and receiving their ammunition. But when they spotted the two of them...
"Lady Roel! Lord Hayate!" Dozens of volunteer soldiers gathered around them. Every one of them wore a smile and saluted the two.
"Everyone..."
"Leave tomorrow's decisive battle to us!" A soldier who still looked like a child said cheerfully. "Even if I'm the last soldier standing, I'll break through this encirclement."
"I'll definitely bring back the relief forces!"
"This will likely be our last meeting, but as for what happens next… I'm counting on you – the entirety of Weimar is counting on you."
They shook hands, and Roel looked perplexed. "Speaking of that… I, well, tomorrow…"
"You'll stay with us, won't you?" An elderly volunteer soldier spoke up. "We intend to win. But… if we lose, someone will have to keep the war going."
"You're the only one who can do that, Roel." A very young soldier smiled. "Dying in battle is easy, but… Rebuilding the city while alive is much harder work..."
"That's what we want you to do." Another soldier spoke up. "It's a tall order, though..."
Roel's voice caught in her throat. There was no sense of despair in any of their eyes. They all believed wholeheartedly in victory and renewal. And when she glanced over... ...
There stood Riot.
She carried two greatswords on her back and had a row of magazines hanging from her waist. Like a necklace, she wore a string of hand grenades, and beside him, she had even lined up a large anti-tank rocket launcher.
"Riott..." Saying this, Roel tried to step forward.
But Riott, like the others, simply smiled. "That's right. Give it up."
Hayate, too, gazed at Roel with gentle eyes.
"Really… everyone… you're so mean…" The tension drained from Roel's body and she came to terms with the weight of this new trial. It was a trial she had no choice but to accept.
"I understand. Please…" Roel pressed her lips together and made her decision. "Riot, I'd like you to take command of the elite unit. Once you've safely broken through the encirclement, head straight for the Fulda Gorge. Then bring the relief force back here…"
"Got it. So…"
"Huh?!"
"No, I don't want you jumping to conclusions." Suddenly cutting them off, Hayate furrowed his brow. "It's fine for Riott to join the breakthrough unit… but I intend to have someone else take command."
"Wait a minute, Hayate, why are you bringing this up now…?"
"Just listen. There's a difference between someone who's strong in combat and someone who's skilled at leadership. I have no doubts about Riott's combat ability, but when it comes to unit command, that's a different matter. Someone with more experience on the battlefield would be better."

At the strategist's words, Riot's expression darkened. "Who will I be working under under? You're not going to be in direct command yourself, are you?"
"I have to issue orders to both the breakthrough unit and the defense unit. I'm afraid I'll be staying in Weimar."
"In that case..." Just as Roel began to ponder...
The iron door at the entrance swung open once more. A massive figure, shouldering an anti-tank rifle, approached the group, exhaling the stench of alcohol and trailing a cloud of smoke.
"Bauser, you...!"
"Not happy to see me, Riot?" The mercenary laughed, looking thoroughly amused. "You and I are more than enough for the assault unit. We're the only ones for whom war is a business. If we don't fight in the end, what's the point?" He blew a ring of smoke into the darkness.
But Riot let out a weary sigh. "You don't trust Justice and me, do you? That's a bold thing to say… I can't team up with you. Get out of here." She snapped, glaring at Bauser.
But the mercenary's eyes were filled with a strangely gentle glow. Hayate gave the towering giant a small nod. "Riot, Bauser... he took on everyone's grievances."
"What do you mean by "rveryone's grievances"...?"
"Many citizens had their doubts about Justice. But what would happen if Lord Roel and I... were to defend Justice? What would become of those people's doubts?"
"Ah..." It finally dawned on her.
Bauser still wore that defiant smile.
Hayate took over and continued speaking. "Everyone was grateful to Justice. But feelings of doubt had also begun to sprout. If they suppress those feelings out of deference to us... they'll explode someday. As dissidents..."
"So, Bauser, you went ahead and..." Roel was surprised and looked up at the mercenary.
Hayate closed his eyes and lowered his voice. "Someone had to say it in front of everyone. That Justice is dangerous... Thanks to that, we found out who didn't trust Justice. We were able to let off some steam, too..."
He let out a sigh toward the mercenary. "…I've made you take on a thankless role, Bauser…"
Riot looked up at Bauser. This time, her gaze softened slightly. "I owe you one……"
"You're just now realizing how kind I am?"
"At least let me say 'thanks'!"
"More importantly, I'm still your commander, right?" He scratched the back of his neck with an exasperated look and snorted. "Even if you say you don't want me, I'm coming with you."
"Do whatever you want." Riot sighed as well and held out her hand.
They shook hands firmly. That was the end of it.
Hayate turned his gaze back to the two mercenaries. "Get everything ready by tonight. Take as much gear as you need."
"We don't need it. We can use the heavy weapons to defend the mine. Besides, even if we lose..." Riot casually brushed his bangs aside. "We'll just die."
"Everyone's gotta die someday, after all." Bauser also exhaled a puff of smoke through his nose.

Now that they were on the same page, the two had no doubts.
Samurai and Roel exchanged nods, their eyes gleaming with determination. “Let us meet them head-on at the mine and settle this once and for all..." His voice was filled with all his strength.

Even past midnight...
The lights in the First Ammunition Depot had not been turned off. Due to power-saving regulations, the interior was dimly lit. Leaning his back against the towering stacks of ammunition crates, Riot continued to meticulously sharpen the twin swords of the swordsmith Zauer.
“Hey, you’re actually pretty cool, aren’t you…” She spoke without taking her eyes off the blade. “Telling us to do whatever we want for our last few hours…”
“I don’t want to die with any regrets.” Bauser sipped his drink while lying on his back. “Those volunteer soldiers have fought hard to get this far. Whether it’s a parent or a lover, I’ll let them spend one last night with whoever they want.”
Looking around, only a few soldiers remained in the surrounding darkness. No one could sleep; they were busily polishing their guns or engrossed in card games. Thanks to Bauser’s arrangement, most of the volunteers had gone out to enjoy their final night.
That said, it wasn’t as if there were any real entertainment. They’d probably just gone back to be with someone.
“I’ve been meaning to ask you this for a while…” Suddenly, Riot paused her work. “You were originally… just a mercenary who happened to be in Weimar by chance, right? What’s the reason you’ve fought this hard?”
“Don’t ask me such a stupid question.” Bauser twisted his mouth into a bitter grimace. “This is a battlefield. I just stuck my neck in because I felt like it. That’s all.”
“Well, it is a war that makes you want to stick your neck in, isn’t it?” Riot turned her gaze toward the volunteer soldiers. Some had young faces, others old. “I want to bring as many people back alive as possible…”
“Yeah, I guess… but thanks to that, I’ve had some pretty interesting experiences.” Bauser pointed at the Battle Armor Demon and said, “Honestly, I never thought I’d run into a celebrity like you in a place like this. I’ve heard plenty about your reputation, you know.”
“It’s probably just a bad reputation, isn’t it?”
“Not really. Two years ago,  Aleton City was attacked by a demon god and nearly destroyed, right? I was fighting there too.”
“So you were in Abram’s mercenary unit? That ‘Flying God’ Abram’s?”  Recalling the past, Riot was impressed. “If you survived that battle, I’ll count on you. You’ll be the first to charge in.”
“Hey, hey, don’t joke around. Unlike you, I’m a bit of a weakling.”
“I’ve never heard of a heavy drinker being a weakling!”
“No, no, unlike you, I’d be a goner if I fought a Demon God. I’ll let you take the lead.”
“You, really... You’d better give it your all tomorrow, you got it? Fight like your life depends on it!”

“You say that, but you’ll cry if I actually die, won’t you? It’s a common scenario. It’s that ‘love you realize just before you die’ thing, isn’t it?” Bauser raised his cup and downed it in one gulp. Riot looked exasperated and let out a sigh.

Behind the two of them...

“W-what is this, you two...”

Riot looked at the group with suspicion. Before they knew it, soldiers from the breakthrough unit had gathered. Even those who were supposed to have left had returned, and dozens of them now surrounded the two.

“Tomorrow’s going to be an early start, so you should get some sleep.”

“I just can’t sleep, honestly.” A young soldier said to Riot. “We all feel the same way. Most of us don’t even have families to go home to anymore...”

“Tonight, we want to stay here with the captains.” Speaking in unison, they sat down on their own and laid out what little food they had left around them. “Captain Bauser, this is the last bottle left in the supply department. Let’s share it.”

What was handed over was a black bottle of the famous Romana Cognac.

Taking it, Bauser looked at the group in utter disbelief. “Come on, you losers. Don’t you have any girlfriends to go home to? And you’re even interrupting Riot and my romantic last night together. No wonder none of you get laid.”

Laughter erupted. The liquor was poured into the soldiers’ cups.

Smiling, Riot decided to enjoy the eve of the decisive battle as well.

Voices of laughter drifted out from the first ammunition depot.

Feeling a twinge of envy at that... Reys turned his back and started walking toward the administrative district.

(I want to go too... but...) He kicked the floor in boredom.

Reys’s squad belonged to the Headquarters Company. They had plenty of experience, but they were all too young. It was because it would be inconvenient to integrate them into another squad and make them fight under a commander. Therefore, they had been ordered to serve at the city garrison tomorrow.

(So I’m stuck on guard duty with Roel and the others...) It wasn’t that he was dissatisfied with that. It was just that Reys, too, longed for the front lines. A more brutal, more hellish battlefield.

(I can do that...) With that thought in mind, he raised his gaze. At the end of the long uphill slope, the administrative district was already visible. Even that passageway was now half-lit. With the decisive battle approaching, every department was rushing about making preparations.

“That’s right, take the communications equipment down to the tunnels too!” Roel’s voice echoed through the corridor. “We’ve switched to the backup, so you can cut the power. The Communications Division is waiting over there... Yes, transport the critically injured to F6 Tunnel—please take care of it!” She issued orders to those around her and relayed instructions over her handheld communicator. It had been a familiar sight for the past month.

But tonight, even Roel’s expression was different. There was no sense of despair; instead, everyone’s fighting spirit was laid bare. There was even an air of aloofness about them.

“Right, let’s organize them into three battalions.” A calm voice came from one side. “Dismantle the 4th Combat Battalion and incorporate its personnel into the other battalions. Each battalion has had personnel assigned to the breakthrough force, and all are severely depleted. Reducing their size should bring them closer to their authorized strength.” Hayate, explaining this to the officer as he walked, was moving faster than usual. He was busily wielding his katana, which served as a walking stick. It was proof of just how much energy he was expending.

(I should try to rest my body a little...) He probably wouldn’t be able to sleep, but Reys made up his mind. (Tomorrow is my turn, after all...) For some reason, he hesitated to talk with Roel and the others tonight.

That could wait until everything was over. Just as he thought that and turned his back on the commotion,—

“H-hey… Reys!”

“Hmm…?” When he turned around, he saw a familiar face. It was the rations officer he’d had a run-in with a few days earlier. For some reason, he was out of breath, his shoulders heaving.

“W-what are you doing here of all places…”

“Good… Here, this is your breakfast for tomorrow morning.” Saying that, he held out a small package. Surprised by how heavy it was, Reys tilted his head.

“If it’s rations, I already got mine. You must have made a mistake.”

“No, you… you’re missing one meal. It’s for the other day…” He stammered and bowed his head. “Sorry, that really was my mistake. My bad!”

“What’s going on? So, what’s this then…”

“Ah, I was looking for this to give you. I just gave it to your buddies a little while ago… but you weren’t there…” Looking closely, he could see beads of sweat on his forehead. Seeing the signs of him running around frantically, Reys instinctively clutched the food package.

“Sorry about that... I went too far the other day, too...”

“No, it’s my fault...”

“But you must have other things to do tonight.”

“I just couldn’t rest easy until I gave this to you...” Relieved, the ration officer smiled at Reys. “Do your best tomorrow, too. I’m counting on you.”

“Yeah, sorry about that...” He said only that to the ration officer as he ran off.

Reys checked the weight of the package once more. (Me, tomorrow... tomorrow...) With resolve in his heart, he clutched the package close.

The breakfast was still warm.

## 【Chapter 5: Weimar / Decisive Battle】

He gripped the long handlebar tightly. As he opened the throttle, the muffler roared, and a thunderous rumble like an earthquake echoed through the warehouse.

“Well then, let’s go, Riot.” Bauser slipped on his goggles, flashing his yellow, tar-stained teeth. “It’s a date all the way to the Fulda Gorge. Let’s go at it until we run out of ammo.”

“Your language is so crude!” Ignoring her makeshift partner, Riot shouted into her throat mic. “Hayate, open the armored shutters! We’re heading out the gate! You handle the rest!”

“Got it, leave it to me...” The familiar voice echoed through her headphones.

“...May the Creator God protect us!”

“The Breakthrough Unit is on the move!” The moment she said it, the steel beast carrying the two mercenaries burst out of the hangar. It climbed straight up the long ramp and raced out through the open gate at breakneck speed. It landed with a jolt and bounced. Kicking snow to the left and right, the black snowmobile with a sidecar made its heroic entrance onto Weimar’s main street. Although it’s called a motorcycle, it’s actually a three-wheeler with a ski on the front and a pair of caterpillar tracks on the rear. From beneath Bowser’s feet, two 20mm automatic cannon barrels jutted forward. Meanwhile, a 12.7mm heavy machine gun was mounted on the sidecar where Riot sat; this was an armed snowmobile with not only the body but even the driver’s seat covered in heavy armor.

Next, about thirty armored personnel carriers followed. Although these all-weather tracked vehicles were slow, they kept pace behind the snow bikes. With the 30mm autocannons in their turrets aimed to the side, the convoy of transport vehicles, loaded with volunteer soldiers, kicked up snow as they began their breakthrough.

“Turn right up ahead! The front is blocked by rubble!” Shouting into the microphone so her voice could be heard over the roar of the engines, Riot barked out the orders. “Once we cross the Moltke Bridge, we’ll push straight through to the outer perimeter! Got it?”

“Weimar Alpha, copy that!”

“Weimar Bravo, following.”

“Weimar Charlie, leave it to us!”

Powerful responses came in from each squadron.

Spewing smoke relentlessly, they cut through the burned-out city. Their figures, pushing against the gale, looked like black bullets.

“Have they lost their minds? Those fools…” Gazing down at Weimar from the pitch-black darkness, Bogdanov let out a roar of laughter. “To think they intend to reach my lord, N’Gai Veil, with just that…” The Blood Pact member sneered loudly at the group racing across the snow. Then, in the darkness, he shifted his gaze.

In the lower levels of Weimar, a frantic stream of people flowed. Both volunteers and civilians were gathering at the central mining facility.

“Don’t rush! Take your time!” Hayate’s figure, giving orders, came into view. The strategist was guiding the people into the long mine shaft. “It’s okay! Everyone, evacuate safely!”

“Hahaha…” Bogdanov couldn’t hold back his laughter. “They think they’re safe by entering the mine surrounded by the Holy Defense Array... How naive... They won’t be able to escape inside the tunnels... That’s why they haven’t used that strategy until now... So they’ve finally been cornered, have they…” And he clenched his slimy fist. But this means the mine facilities are now understaffed... Without the Battle Armor Demon or the Holy War Officer, they’re practically defenseless.”

But... He rubbed his healed wound, confident of victory.

"Bogdanov... that will not do. Stop that breakthrough unit as well. They must not be allowed to reach the Fuldah Gorge." A dark, distorted figure reappeared.

At the thought that had returned, Bogdanov shouted angrily. "Why?! Just leave them be! They are no match for my master! You must understand that!"

But the thought firmly rejected him. "If it were only them, it wouldn't matter... But N'gai-Veil, in particular... seems to be in dire straits."

With a shudder, the Blood Oath member shifted his gaze. A snow-covered gorge loomed in the darkness. Undeterred by the raging blizzard, countless paladins continued their orderly advance. Each of their silver suits of armor bore a black cross. The battle flags fluttering in the wind were also black. They signified the direct command unit of the Black Pope, who ruled over the Saxony region.

"The Third Papal Regiment… The strongest mobile strike force in the Saxony region..." A calm voice in his mind announced.

At that very moment, the holy knights and the horde of demon gods clashed. The knightly order, specialized in fighting evil spirits, felt no fear. They swung their swords relentlessly, thrust their lances, and scattered the evil spirits.

Behind them, numerous Holy War Officers accompanied them. They maintained their formation with defensive miracles and pressed forward. It was a relentless assault.

"Eg… N'gai Veil... Eg…... Reg…... N'gai-Veil…"

Bogdanov heard his master's groan. His power was waning, and his thoughts lacked vitality. It was a situation that naturally inspired dread. If N'gai Veil died, those whom he made a Blood Pact with would lose their power as well. Their very existence would vanish.

"Th-then, what should I do...?"

"It's simple. Stop the assault force… and destroy the mine as well…" The thought told Bogdanov, who was gnashing his teeth. "After all, the imperial decree originally given to N'gai Veil was to destroy the mining facilities... Even if he were to vanish, if you were to fulfill the imperial decree... His Imperial Majesty the Dark God Lucifer would surely grant you forgiveness…"

Bogdanov raised his face, which had been on the verge of despair. To fulfill the Demon Emperor's decree… Few Blood Pact members have been granted that honor. Precisely because of that…

His ambition flared up like wildfire. "Understood… but please, at least…"

"Hmm. I shall lend you my power…" A malicious smile echoed through his thoughts as he looked down at Bogdanov. "I shall imbue you with my magic... then surely... that city will be destroyed…" In an instant, a blinding flash of light erupted from the pitch-black darkness.

The Blood Oath member's memories vanished into the vortex of light at the same time.

The heart of the mine was a massive cylindrical cavern. Thick bedrock had been hollowed out to a diameter of roughly one hundred meters and a height of three hundred meters. Countless tunnels had been carved out of the walls in the central area. A line of evacuees stretched into those dark holes. Looking up, it was a breathtakingly spectacular sight.

But that mine...

"So they've come after all...!" Realizing the situation, Hayate gritted his teeth.

A gasping voice echoed up from the depths. The massive stone gates remained wide open on both sides. Beyond those gates, the stone-paved floor began to glow white.

Arranged in a circle on the floor were ancient sacred characters. It was the Sacred Defense Array of Justice, designed to repel evil spirits and dark magic.

“Second and Third Battalions, prepare to fire!” He shouted into his communicator and deployed his troops to the left and right.

Roel also turned to face the First Battalion in the center. “I’ll take direct command! All units, prepare to engage! Heavy weapons, load individually!”

Passing by civilians fleeing into the tunnels, the militia’s gun barrels advanced boldly. Old men, children, and the crippled - these were the last of the militia, exhausted and worn out.

At the very front of that First Battalion...

“Rimuro, go now!” Reys ruffled her little head. “Don’t cause any trouble for everyone. Be good.”

“I know, Reys.” Puffing out her cheeks, the girl looked up at Reys.

“You do your best too, big bro.”

“Yeah, I know. Hurry up and go!” Rimuro mingled with the other children and retreated deeper into the mine shaft. Then Reys turned to face his comrades. “Everyone, show them no mercy...”

Soldiers from the headquarters company had also gathered around them. Loading a round into his prized sniper rifle, Reys’s powerful voice rang out. “Don’t even think about surviving. Think only of killing the Demon Gods—that’s how we’ll win!”

“That’s gonna be a little tough, bro.”

“Don’t complain.”

They all raised their gun barrels in unison.

Right before their eyes, the Holy Defense Array began to glow even brighter.

Immediately, a deafening scream erupted.

“Dea Burgthom! Ade! Ade! Bur Zagthom!”

Space warped strangely, and countless tentacles crawled out of the pitch-black darkness. Hundreds of pale, fleshy whips writhed about, searching for their prey. Soon, with a slithering sound, the main body materialized as well.

A massive brain, wet and glowing pink. Tentacles extended from the brain, constantly dripping mucus onto the floor. At the base of the brain, countless cilia rustled like legs. It was a colossal creature over ten meters in length.

“What on earth is that...” Even Roel, a seasoned warrior, felt nauseated by its grotesque appearance. The volunteer soldiers stood dumbfounded.

“Dea Burgthom! Ade! Ade! Bur Zagthom!” The evil god raised its countless tentacles. It struck the invisible wall formed by the Holy Defense Array with brute force.

“Guhhh!”

The Zodanium Mine shook. A massive burst of holy light erupted, and Roel let out a scream. Hayate and the soldiers covered their eyes.

“Don’t panic! It’s the power of the Holy Defense Array!”

Hayate raised his gaze. Beyond the invisible wall, dozens of tentacles lay charred black on the floor. The Holy Defense Array was still sparking with plasma.

"Dea Burgthom! Ade! Ade! Bur Zagthom!" Letting out a discontented roar, it unleashed another barrage of tentacles. With each strike, flashes of light flickered, and the mine's tremors grew increasingly violent.

But Hayate stood firm, his posture unwavering. :There's no land beyond this point! Weimar Volunteer Army, we're going to win!"

A collective roar of "Hurrah!" erupted.

Reys held his breath, waiting for that moment.

Bathed in a flash of light, Roel drew her sword with force and reached for the throat microphone.

"Riot, they're here! It's the Evil Spirit—one of them!"

On the speeding snowmobile, the Battle Armor Demon and the mercenary locked eyes.

But Bowser didn't even try to slow down. He ignored them and accelerated toward the city limits.

"How's the Holy Defense Barrier?"

"It's still holding! Not sure how long it'll last, though!"

"What about Bogdanov...?"

"No, just the Evil Spirit! Over there too...!"

The Evil Spirit's roar burst through his headphones. The transmission was drowned out by static. Riot clicked her tongue and her face darkened.

"Just one... Could it be another Count-rank..?"

"Even if it is, there's nothing we can do!" Bauser shouted, sounding almost desperate. "We know splitting our forces is a risky move!" As he revved the engine, a gust of wind blew.

This was no ordinary wind. A wrecked car by the roadside was lifted into the air and hurled into a pile of rubble. A building leaning at an angle collapsed with a loud crash. Large snowflakes lashed at them from the side.

At the same moment, the snowmobiles suddenly came to a screeching halt. One after another, the armored vehicles began to slow down as well.

"Alpha Two, engine compartment frozen!"

"Bravo Eight, stopping!"

Reports bordering on screams pierced the air from each vehicle.

"Damn it! You're not working hard enough!" But Bowser, who had just cursed, was stunned. In the brief moment, thick frost had already coated the engines.

"Magic Gland Output: 520...  Spacetime distortion confirmed at 2 o'clock…"

The display flashed across Riot's retina. Jumping off the sidecar, Riot disengaged the safety lock on her prosthetic arm. "Come out! Bogdanov!" She shouted, her voice cutting through the blizzard. "I've come to get revenge for my lost arm! Show yourself!"

"Frigid Prison Freezing Shockwave..." Along with the voice, the blizzard intensified.

And then Bowser lost his voice. The handlebar he was gripping crumpled in his hand. He scrambled off the bike, and the black body of the vehicle began to crack. "What kind of magic is he using......!" With a frantic hand, he reached for the anti-tank rifle on the back of the bike. But the barrel shattered into dust.

"That's probably his most powerful magic..." Realizing this, Riott gritted her teeth. "That's how he pulled off that first ambush, too..."

"Just as I expected…" From beyond the blizzard, a thought radiated out. "I won't let you reach the Fuldah Gorge... I'll take your lives right here... And this city as well!"

"All units, disembark and prepare for combat! All gun emplacements, ready!" As Bauser roared, the armored vehicles formed a cordon. The volunteer soldiers disembarked in a scattered rush, grabbing their guns and dashing for cover. Riot drew a greatsword from her back. Only the blade of Zodanium, gleaming like a key, had escaped the freezing.

"Fine by me! I'll take you on!" With that, she hurled the remaining sword at the mercenary.

Bauser caught it and gripped it with both hands, feeling its weight. "Fine by me! I'll chop off every limb you have!"

"Try me." With a twisted laugh, he materialized.

In that instant, Riot couldn't believe her eyes. "Y-you really are…!"

Bauser swallowed hard. The volunteer soldiers grimaced at the sight.

Bogdanov's silhouette was severely distorted, no longer resembling a human form. Both shoulders had burst through his clothes, protruding massively. Moreover, his body was cracked and bluish-black. Four large claws dangled from his spiky arms. Numerous tentacles hung from his abdomen, fluttering aimlessly through the air. His legs were nothing more than tangled masses of tentacles. His entire body was covered in slimy mucus.

"You sacrificed your own body as the price of the Blood Oath..."

"That is the nature of the Blood Pact…" With his face buried in the mass of flesh, Bogdanov spoke. "To cast aside this fragile human body and be reborn as a powerful demon god... that is my true desire… But if Lord N'gai-Veil is slain, my hope for rebirth will be crushed… And that... I cannot allow...!"

"Watch out!" Bauser leaped to the side.

A whirlwind of cold air erupted from the Blood Pact member's mouth. It blew away the snow, and the volunteer soldiers were slammed into the rubble.

"Gah!"

"Eek!"

But Riot swung her sword in a wide arc. The blade of Zodanium sliced the attacking white magic in two.

"Twelve thousand lives are at stake here, too!" Riot gripped her greatsword once more. "I'll cut you down right here. I won't let you reach the mine…" The Battle Armor Demon's roar shook the silver landscape.

The blizzard grew even more ferocious.

"Dea Burgthom! Ade! Ade! Burzagthom!" The gigantic brain, flailing its tentacles, repeated its screams.

The invisible wall protecting the mining facility began to buckle, and the plasma grew weaker.

"It'll break through any moment now! Brace yourself!" Roel warned those around her. Her headphones had been filled with screams from the central control room for some time now. "The outside temperature is dropping rapidly! Detecting a significant amount of magical energy... Temperature in the first underground level: minus sixty degrees! Also in the first underground level: heating system down!"

“Lord Hayate! At this rate, the city’s functions will be completely destroyed! The warm air being sent here too...!”

But Hayate’s resolve did not waver in the slightest. With his hand still on his katana, he bit his lip. “The only things we must protect now are the mine and the citizens... The city can be rebuilt later... For now, we must devote our every effort... to protecting these two things...”

“Understood...!” Resolved, Roel also repositioned her sword in both hands. “Water supply lines, shut down on the second underground level!”

“Switching to emergency power generators.”

“The effects of the magic are spreading to the fourth underground level!”

(Justice......) The bitter cold stinging her face deepened Roel’s anxiety. The heat supply to the dungeons had likely stopped as well. How long could they hold out under these conditions? Knowing the harshness of winter, Roel desperately shook off his despair.

“Dea Burgthom!”

In response to the shout, Hayate roared. “They’re coming! The Holy Defense Array is breaking!”

“Ade! Ade! Buru Zaguthom!” The Evil Spirit delivered a full-force blow to the entrance. Countless tentacles burned away and scattered - at the same time, the invisible wall shattered. Ignoring the stone, he charged into the mining facility. As pale blue plasma discharged, the stone gates collapsed from both sides.

Hayate, amidst the falling debris, barked an order at the volunteer army. “Open fire!”

A deafening barrage of gunfire rained down on the Evil Spirit from all directions. A hail of Zodanium bullets pierced through its slimy, massive brain  and blew its tentacles to pieces. The volunteer soldiers no longer felt fear. Lying in ambush at their positions had given them a sense of composure. They fired in an orderly fashion, and not a single soldier panicked.

However, the Demon God’s regenerative abilities far outweighed the damage inflicted. In the blink of an eye, it slid across the floor and lunged at the volunteer soldiers in the front line.

“Dea Burgtom! Ade! Ade! Buru Zagtom!”

“Gyaaaaaaaah!” A soldier flung aside by a tentacle rolled across the floor, both arms torn from his body. His severed head slammed into the wall. The scene transformed instantly into a sea of blood.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Reys unleashed a barrage of Zodanium rounds. He rained down a barrage of gunfire on the slimy mass. But the onslaught did not stop, and the defensive positions were shattered one after another.

“Third Battalion, fall back to the rear positions!” Shouting, Hayate charged forward. “Form up! Fall back for now!”

The volunteer soldiers rushed into the narrow retreat route. Without panic, they shifted into a new defensive formation. Hayate covered their retreating backs, and drew his katana. Then, sliding in before the Demon God, he drew the blade of “Seima” with godlike speed.

“Lord Hayate!” Roel shouted, trying to stop the strategist’s charge.

But Hayate swept Seima sideways, severing a tentacle as thick as a tree trunk at its base - with a whoosh, a bluish-black fluid sprayed into the air.

“Dea Burgthom!” The enraged Evil Spirit swung a tentacle down toward Hayate’s head. But the Strategist deftly dodged the blown and sliced the missed tentacle clean in two.

“Adeaa! Adeaa!”

He exhaled deeply. Facing the Demon God head-on, Hayate was drenched in the foul-smelling bodily fluid. But he shrugged his shoulders, glared at the Demon God, and aised the tip of his demon-sealing blade. “Show the power of the Weimar Volunteer Army! Do not spare your lives! But spare your honor!”

The volunteers heard his voice from their new position. The will to respond filled the ranks with solemn resolve “Cover Lord Hayate! Open fire individually!”

“Def! Jam! Fire away!” Reys unleashed a barrage of fire at the forefront of the entire squad. A fierce crossfire intercepted the Demon God’s rapid advance Just twenty meters remained to the core of the mining facility. It was a bloody battle.

“Third Strike! Extreme Pressure Freeze Strike!” Bogdanov’s thoughts echoed across the snowy plain. Magic-infused icicles streaked through the air. They pierced even the armored vehicle’s thick frontal armor, setting it ablaze with a single strike. The crew engulfed in flames were mercilessly impaled by the icicles.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”Countless 30mm autocannons unleashed a torrent of Zodanium rounds. Flamethrowers, general-purpose rockets—they swarmed the Blood Oath-swron. Dodging every single line of fire in midair, Bogdanov continued his devastating assault.

“If you’ve got the guts to fight, then stop hiding and come out, Armored Demon!”

Riot and Bauser dived into the shadows of the rubble on either side.

“Damn it! Not again!” Ignoring the roar of the shattering icicles, Bauser shouted in anger. “We can’t get anywhere near him like this!”

“That doesn’t mean we should give up!” Riot also lowered her gaze from the flying shards of ice. “We’re the only ones who can win!”

All they had were the twin swords of the swordsmith Zauer. If they were to land a single blow on the Blood Pact members, close combat was their only option - but Bogdanov’s offensive magic kept them at a safe distance, with a force that wouldn’t let them get even a single step closer

“Can we... win...?  Such empty words...” His cold, piercing eyes glowed white. In an instant, the tentacles dangling from his abdomen shot out. The flesh whip, stretching over ten meters, smashed through the rubble and cleaved the snow in two.

“Captain Bauser!” Countless soldiers were struck, letting out screams.

The mercenary gritted his teeth at the sight of fresh blood splattering across the snow. “How dare you do as you please!”

Rising to his feet, Bauser swung his sword. He sliced through the tentacles streaking through the air, parrying their attacks. The speed of his sword was extraordinary. Even Riot could see he was quite skilled.

“Not bad, mercenary...!” Bogdanov’s attacks were relentless. He struck down from above while simultaneously sweeping at his feet. Losing his balance, Bauser fell helplessly to the side. A flash of the tentacle’s tip sliced through his chest, tearing his battle uniform to shreds.

"Guhhhhh!"
"Bauser, dodge!"
Spilling fresh blood onto the snow, Bauser rolled away.
As if taking his place, Riot charged forward - she sliced off the Blood Pact member's tentacles and, as soon as she closed in, hurled a grenade from her chest. "Take this, you white-haired brat!"
As if scattering the blizzard, the napalm grenade erupted in flames. A brief opening appeared as Bogdanov leapt back. Seizing the moment, she closed in. Riot brought hersword down from above.
"You're pretty good for a mere machine!" Bogdanov crossed his arms and blocked the sword strike with his massive claws. Sparks flew.
Riot forced the long blade of holy steel in, inch by inch. "Even a machine has pride..."
"Hope is fleeting... Even those left to defend mines will die..." Bogdanov responded with a ferocious grin. "After all, they have…" Riot swatted the tentacles aside.
The Battle Armor Demon caught her breath, eyes gleaming. With a leap, Riot leaped onto the snowy plain.

"Aaaaaah!" With a scream, Roel leaped. She swung his sword, raised high above her head, with all her might. The blade cleaved through the demon god's brain, severing bundles of nerves.
"Adeaa! Adeaa!" Perhaps driven mad, the screaming demon god slammed its tentacles against the floor. Splattering its own bodily fluids and mucus, the gigantic brain writhed in agony.
"Now! Fall back!" Turning around, Hayate shouted. "Each squad, defend the tunnel entrances! Third Battalion, take up positions in front of the control room!" The screams of the civilians echoed deep into the tunnels. The rear guard was being desperately defended by the volunteer soldiers. But undeterred by the relentless fire, the Demon God continued to advance toward the mine's central hub, where the tunnel entrances converged.
There was no turning back now.
"Ms. Roel, you must flee too!"
"Lord Hayate, hurry! We can't hold them back any longer!"
"It's not over yet!" Roel snapped at the screaming civilians. She slashed at the oncoming tentacles and shouted with a look of utter desperation. "Close the armored shutters at the mine entrance where everyone has evacuated! Set the offensive electrified barrier to maximum output!"
The retreating volunteer soldiers could hardly believe their ears. "But then the two of you will be—!"
"I'm staying here! Just close it!" "Don't worry about us! Go on ahead!"
Roel and Hayate shouted in unison.
Seeing those two... Reys looked down at his sniper rifle. Everyone's ammunition was already running low. The only ones who could keep fighting were Roel and Hayate, armed with their Zodanium blades.
(But if things keep going like this... Just those two alone...)
Suddenly, the mine wall exploded. The fiber-cement wall split open, and something enormous burst out from within.

“Ah, big bro!”
“Get down! It’s collapsing!”
The young soldiers also dashed for cover and looked up at the sky.
Everyone was stunned by what they saw.
“I-ice…?” As Roel furrowed her brow, a new scream rang out through her headphones.
“The effects of the magic have spread to the mine district! Fierce cold air is freezing the groundwater! Ice that abnormally expanded in the main power reactor is protruding! The power lines to the second underground level have been severed! Power supply has dropped to 20%!”
One after another, massive chunks of ice burst forth from left and right, and from above and below. The groundwater protruding from the tunnel ceiling caused a cave-in. The citizens’ screams echoed throughout the entire tunnel.
“Move the ice! My daughter is down there...!”
“Mom! Mom!”
“Oh my God…!”
The abundant groundwater had been the lifeline of their siege.
Now, it was baring its vicious fangs at the citizens.
“Reys, I’m scared!” Rimuro’s screams could be heard from deep within the tunnel.
But Reys, trembling with fear, glared at the evil god.
(I have no choice but to do this... I... have no choice but to do this...) He slowly stood up and leaped over the rubble. Then he ran straight toward the mine’s exit.
“Brother! Where are you going?!”
“Wait! Reiz! Don’t leave your post!”
The voices of his comrades and someone else. But he had no intention of listening.
(It all comes down to him…!) As he ran, he repeated it over and over. (He’s the only one who can let us win!)
Roel finally caught sight of the black bullet-like figure streaking through the air.
“Reys! Where are you going! Not now...!”
“Get back!”
A tentacle swung down right before their eyes. Along with the warning, Hayate stepped in. The strategist’s single stroke parried the surprise attack and sliced it away. Regaining his composure, Roel moved forward alongside him. Their gazes met, and their breathing synchronized.
“Hooooooo!” Swinging swords and katanas from both sides, they closed in on the Demon God. They severed the writhing tentacles.
“Dea Burgthom!  Ade! Ade! Buru Zagthom!” Counterattacking tentacles wrapped around their arms and legs - they shook them off instinctively and retreated sharply. Once again, they created distance.
“You’re tenacious...!” Roel voiced her frustration. The Evil Spirit’s regenerative abilities were reviving the tentacles before their very eyes. It seemed endless.
There was a limit to how long they could block its advance.
But Hayate, having caught his breath, asked quietly. “Its power is different from the Evil Spirits we’ve fought before...” As the Demon God readied itself, the Strategist raised his blade. He fixed the Demon God with a gaze so fierce it was almost gruesome. “Then, with this single stroke… I shall finish you!”
No sooner had he spoken than Hayate leaped forward in a single bound.

At the same moment, Roel let out a scream. “Wait, Lord Hayate!”

The “Seima” flashed with the blinding light of a decisive strike. Hayate’s blade roared, and his offensive miracle scattered a blinding flash.

“Divine Thunder Flash Sword Strike!” A roar of fury, pouring out his entire being, charged toward the Demon God. Hayate’s body vanished in an instant, swallowed up by the white light.

“W-what...?” With those words, Justice collapsed to the ground. Both hands trembled violently, and his whole body convulsed. His teeth had long since chattered to the point of grinding. “I wonder if the heating stopped…” He slumped against the wall of the cramped dungeon cell. But even that wall was now completely covered with something that had clung to it without him noticing. Drops seeping from the ceiling were turning into icicles right before his eyes. “No… this cold… it’s abnormal… It must be… that guy’s magic…” His winter gear was practically useless. His whole body ached so much he thought his bones had frozen. He desperately caught his own breath at his collar. That was the only warmth he had.

“If only… I could use a miracle right now…” Justice forced the words out, as if fighting against his fading consciousness. His Holy War Staff had been confiscated. Right now, he was nothing more than a boy. “Riot... Dad...” The coldness of the floor tormented his entire body, and even his consciousness was beginning to fade. The boy closed his eyes and curled his fingertips. Clutching the Holy Seal, Justice offered a prayer for the first time in his life. At that very moment…

“Aaaargh!”

The ceiling exploded. A massive chunk of ice had smashed through the ceiling of the dungeon. Immediately afterward, large bricks began to crumble and fall. Justice rolled frantically, trying to escape the falling debris. But a rain of stones mercilessly rained upon his entire body.

“Guh... uugh...!”

The door was locked.

There was no chance of escape.

Excruciating pain shot through his shoulders and arms, tearing his skin.

Even so, he reached out toward the door.

At the door that would never open... with his trembling arms...

“Justice!” The moment it opened, a small figure rushed in. He scooped Justice up and quickly dragged him out of the dungeon. Justice stared up at the figure in a daze.

“Reys, why... why are you here...”

“I’m here, Justice...”

“Reiz...” For some reason, tears welled up.

Reiz nodded firmly. “You’re going to fight the Blood Pact members from now on...!” Reiz declared resolutely. “That’s the only way to save Weimar! I won’t let anyone object!”

“Reys…” Justice smiled in Reys’ arms. Reys returned the smile with a smirk. A slight touch of affection was woven into their embrace. “Reys, the Demon God…”

“Yes, it has stormed the mining facility. Things are getting ugly!” Lending Justice a shoulder, Reys stood up. Then he quickly snatched up an item that had been leaning against the wall. “Found it in the guard’s room. Use this!”

What he handed him was the Holy Officer Staff. Justice gripped it tightly. The rare gem, Metalite, was already emitting a poisonous glow.
“I hear Riot is fighting on the surface too. What do you say? Which one do we rescue first?”
“Everyone’s in the mine. Let’s go there first.”
“Got it, I’ll show you the way.” He shyly rubbed the tip of his frozen nose with his finger. “Welcome to my town, Holy War Officer.”
The boys sprinted at full speed down the icy corridor.

“Lord Hayate!” Roel let out a scream as a flash of light erupted. The offensive miracle that burst forth from the Strategist’s katana sent a massive heat wave crashing into the sky. It collided with the surrounding cold air, raising a tremendous cloud of steam. It looked as though that single strike had struck the Demon God head-on. But.........
“Dea Burgthom!” Roaring, the Demon God raised several tentacles. It lined them up in front of itself, forming a wall of flesh. And the wall erupted with lightning.
“Everyone, get down!” Roel shouted instinctively and rolled onto the floor. A clash of miracles and magic roared past overhead. The deafening roar and shockwave, still intertwined, shook the mine facility.
“Aaaaaaah!”
The walls were deeply cracked from the abnormal expansion of groundwater. Unable to withstand the impact, chunks of concrete began to fall into the tunnel. A chain reaction of cave-ins crushed the citizens beneath them.
“Lord Hayate! Lord Hayate!” Roel kept screaming over and over, her ears ringing from the explosions. Eventually… silence fell. Roel got to her feet and saw a massive, charred brain lying there. Then she turned his gaze toward the pile of rubble.
Hayate lay buried beneath the debris, still clutching his katana. But he didn’t move a muscle. Blood stained his chest a deep, dark red.
“Ha… Hayate!!” Roel rushed over and shouted at the top of her lungs. At the sound of er voice, both the volunteer soldiers and the citizens looked up in unison. People poured out of the mine entrance one after another.
“That’s Lord Hayate!”
“Surely that single blow didn’t…!”
They were speechless at the sight of the charred body of the Evil God - but Roel had completely forgotten about the Evil God. “Lord Hayate! Lord Hayate!”
She lifted him up and shook him desperately. His body, cold as a corpse, felt unnaturally light. There was absolutely no sign of life. Still, she kept calling out to him. Just as the worried volunteer soldiers rushed over, he finally...
“....Roel... my lady...” He squeezed out the words, gasping for breath.
“Stay strong! Lord Hayate!”
“The Evil Spirit... everyone...” A volunteer soldier who had rushed over answered for him. “Thanks to you, Lord Hayate... we... managed to hold them off... I thank you...”
“I see,” Hayate groaned, then coughed violently. He spat blood into his palm and turned back to Roel. “The battle isn’t over yet… I’m worried about Riot too… Go on, go…”

“Understood… but Lord Hayate…”
“Don’t worry about me…” With his face covered in blood, he forced a smile. “There must be many wounded... You should focus on them...”
“I will. Kruger!” Roel stood up resolutely. “Gather the surviving volunteers! We’re going to support Riot and Bauser!”
“Roger that! As for the wounded...” Just as the officer began to speak...
“Dea Burgthom... Ade... Ade... Bur Zagthom...” The thoughts spread out across the area.
Roel turned around in horror. The corpse of the Evil Spirit should have been there - but the massive brain had now split open from the center, and a flesh-colored giant was rising from within.
“Dea Burgthom… Ade… Ade… Burzagthom…”
“Everyone, fall back!” The citizens, who had briefly felt relieved, scrambled to flee into the mine shafts. Hayate, who had been struck, was carried by the volunteer soldiers and led to the rear. Roel gripped her sword and faced the new creature head-on.
It looked like a human rotting alive. If such a thing existed in this world, it was undoubtedly the Evil Spirit standing right before him. The giant, standing five meters tall, certainly resembled a muscular human male - but his entire body was made of raw muscle tissue, half of it covered in pink, squishy swellings. It glared at Roel with its gooey, melted eyeballs. A face so repulsive it made one want to vomit. But it was definitely...
“Surely this thing isn’t...!”
“Dea Burgthom… Ade... Ade... Bur Zagthom…” It advanced, stretching both arms toward Roel and the others. The growths burst with a popping sound, spraying bizarre mucus all around. The highly acidic substance melted the floor and scorched the debris.
“Fall back! Open fire!” Leaping over the pile of rubble, Roel gave the order. Simultaneously, a crossfire met the Demon God. But the moment the shots struck, the Demon God’s growths exploded like water bags. The mucus spread throughout the area.
The soldiers doused in it let out screams and writhed in agony.
“Gyaaaaaah!”
“No... this is impossible...” Hayate groaned, lying on his back in the rear.
The volunteer soldiers retreated at the sound of his scream.
“What should we do, Lord Roel?!”
“What should we do…!”If they closed in, they would inevitably become prey to the slime. Even Roel hesitated to engage in close combat.
Seizing that opening, the Demon God charged forward with ferocious speed. At the sight of a dash so swift it belied its massive form, the volunteer soldiers scattered frantically to the left and right. Trampling the soldiers who were too slow to escape, the Demon God leaped onto a rotating excavator.
“No, not that...!” Right before Roel’s eyes, the Demon God’s arms shattered the conveyor belt. Even the steel supports melted away, emitting steam.
“Dea Burgthom...  Ade... Ade... Burzagthom…” Faced with this bizarre attack, the volunteer soldiers were frozen in place.

But Roel let out a roar and charged forward. “Aaaah!” Aiming for the gap in the swelling,s he slashed vertically through the Achilles tendon. Then she thrust the tip of her blade into the wound.
The Evil Spirit’s attention had shifted to Roel. With the leg that should have been severed, it violently kicked the young gunner away.
“Noooooo!”
“Lady Roel!”
Both the volunteer soldiers and the citizens let out screams. Strongly acidic mucus clung to Roel’s arms. As it dissolved her field uniform and burned down to the bone, Roel instinctively dropped her sword.
“Ah… Aaaah!” Roel looked down at his arms. The skin was peeling away, exposing raw flesh. Just like the evil spirit standing before him. In that instant, her consciousness faded.
“L-Lady Roel...!” Hayate struggled desperately to sit up.
Suddenly, a white light flashed before his eyes.
“First strike!” The voice of the summoning echoed through the tunnel.

“Cold Wind of Valhalla! Frigid Gales of the Underground Temple!” Everyone was stunned by that voice. A faint ring of holy light soared from the fingertips that had uttered the command. Roel sat up and called out his name.
“Justice!”
The blond Holy Warrior stood there - but his steps were unsteady, and he was being supported on either side by Def and Jam. For some reason, his face was swollen, and his sacred armor was stained with blood. Yet his fingertips desperately triggered a miracle.
“Dea Burgthom…” The Evil God turned around with a grand gesture. A blast of frigid air struck at his massive form. A white vortex transformed into a faint human figure. It became a female knight with flowing golden hair, who swung her spear in a flash and slammed it into the Evil God.
“Valkyrieee!” A swarm of pure white light bullets rained down upon the Evil God. But upon impact, they didn’t even allow bodily fluids to spray. The mucus froze in midair. It’s entire, wet and gleaming body froze solid in an instant.
“Dea Burgthom! Ade! Ade! Buru Zagthom!” It tried to step forward but couldn’t move. The Evil God’s feet had already frozen to the floor. Enraged, it reached out toward Justice. But in front of the Holy War Officer, Reys had raised his sniper rifle. As if to protect Justice, he let out a furious roar.
“Get out of here! Get out of Weimar!” Shouting, Reys fired a bullet at the evil spirit. His aim was true, and the Zodanium armor-piercing round struck the evil spirit in the back of the head. In an instant, the evil spirit’s solidly frozen body shattered into a million pieces like glass.
“Dea Burgthom! Guh...!” The demon god’s body creaked as he turned around.
When his gaze looked down upon Reys... Reize instinctively covered his mouth. Only now did he realize - the rotten, melted face of the evil god was half-frozen. Yet its features remained intact. The cruel-looking face of the evil spirit was, without a doubt, that of Bogdanov, the Blood Oath-sworn.
“You’re a confident one, kid... But confidence and arrogance are two different things…” A roar of laughter echoed in his mind. Nausea and chills rose up from his feet.
But Reys...
“Don't mess with me!” He fired his gun with defiance at the demon god's forehead, eyes, and throat... He fired a barrage of bullets, as if to blow those features to smithereens. “This is my city! Get out of here right now! Get out! Get out!” He continued, riddling the body with bullets one after another.
Shattering fingers, shattering wrists. Ripping through shoulders, shooting at the waist.
At that sight, Hayate mustered every ounce of strength he had left.
“Kruger! All units, open fire!” Choking on blood, the strategist shouted. “Don’t worry about ammunition! Now is our chance to defeat the Evil Spirit!”
“Fire!” At the command, countless bullets pierced the Evil Spirit. Arms fell, heads flew. Even if it tried to dodge, its legs were glued to the floor. Eventually, those legs too were blown to smithereens.
“Dea Burgthom! Ade! Ade-...” His thoughts cut off. The Evil Spirit turned into countless shards and crumbled to the ground with a clatter.
Justice finally released the Holy Seal. “We... we did it...”
“Justice! Reys!” Hayate struggled desperately to sit up.

The volunteer soldiers also rushed toward the two from behind the rubble. But Justice staggered forward and approached the fallen Roel.

“Roel, hold on, Roel...”

“Justice... you...” The girl stared at Justice in a daze.

“I’ll heal your wounds right now! Just wait...”

“No... don’t waste a miracle on me...” Fighting the pain, Roel shook her head. “Riot is fighting... Please, go to her... Your power...” She managed to say that much before the excruciating pain silenced her.

“Thank you... Thank you...” Justice gazed into Roel’s tear-filled eyes. Her gaze seemed to want to say something, but now was not the time for words.

“Okay!” He entrusted Roel’s body to the volunteer soldiers. Then, he stood up straight. When he looked back, he saw Reys’s resolute face.

“Justice, let’s go! I’m worried about Riott!”

And then, Justice and Raiz... noticed the countless mine shafts surrounding them. Citizens were pouring out of every tunnel, looking down at the boys.

For a moment, Reys stiffened. But at the very front, a small hand was waving.

“Lord Justice! Big bro Reys!”A girl called out cheerfully.

“I’m coming too! Take me with you!”

As if drawn by that voice, a sea of cheers erupted.

“That’s right, I’m going too!”

“Take me with you, Holy Warrior!”

The cheers were joined by applause, eventually swelling into a battle cry.

Smiling at their vigor, Hayate waved his hand. “Go on then...” He coughed and continued in a faint voice. “Riot is waiting for you...!”

Justice bowed and faced the sniper. Reys nodded as well and dashed toward the passageway. His footsteps echoed with unwavering resolve. “Wait for me, big bro! Justice!” His comrades, rushing to catch up, also began running frantically.

Toward their final battlefield...

“Gaaaaah!” Suddenly, Bogdanov writhed in agony mid-air. He stared at his right arm, his face contorting in agony. “No... no way!  That brat…!”

“Talking to yourself at a time like this?!” Riot kicked off the snow and leaped. She swung her Zodanium greatsword at the stunned Blood Pact member. But Bogdanov leapt backward, as if dancing through the blizzard.

“Looks like I played around a bit too much... It’s a shame I don’t have the time...>

“He must mean Justice!” Bauser shouted, clutching his chest where blood was spurting. Right before his eyes, Riot landed.

“Wait, is that true?!”

Hayate’s voice echoed through his headphones. “Justice is heading your way right now! The damage to the mine is minimal! Don’t worry!”

Cheers rose from the soldiers who heard the transmission. Riot let out a sigh of relief with her whole body. She didn’t know what had happened, but one thing was certain: they were getting closer to victory.

“The effect of that magic from earlier… it’s fading quite a bit, Bogdanov…” She said in a defiant tone, fixing her gaze on her sword. “Your power has its limits… Justice read it that way… and it seems he was right.”

Bauser, too, had noticed the changes in temperature and wind strength. The blizzard had lost its momentum, and the cold that could shatter metal had vanished. Magic powerful enough to freeze all of Weimar... couldn't possibly last that long.
"Then our chance to win has arrived..." The mercenary gripped his sword and moved to the side. Together with Riot, they were now in a position to flank the Blood Pact members.
"Those slimy legs must be hard to walk on... I'll trim them down for you..."
"Shut your filthy mouths, you maggots!" Veins bulged on Bogdanov's forehead. The Blood Pact member concentrated his thoughts and descended in a single bound.
"Fifth Strike! Frigid Winter Annihilation Strike!"
"Everyone! It's coming!" With a shout, Riot leaped sideways to escape. Bauser also threw himself onto the snow. As Bogdanov plunged downward, a whirlwind of magical cold energy swirled around his arms. As he swung down, the blow blew away the snow and split the earth in two. A cloud of black dust billowed up from the fissure in the ground.
"Don't hesitate! Stop him!" The volunteer soldiers blocked Bogdanov's advance with a barrage of fire. But without hesitation, the Blood Oath member closed in on Riot.
"Do you think you can escape?!" Bogdanov brought his massive claws down again and again. If she parried the arm imbued with offensive magic, the blade of her sword would shatter.
"I'm right here too, Bogdanov!" Fearing this, Riot focused entirely on evasion.
With a shout, Bauser leaped in. "Are ordinary humans not enough for you?!" He put the full weight of his massive frame behind the greatsword, delivering a heavy blow to the right arm. The spiked arm cracked, and a bluish-black fluid spurted out.
"You bastard of a mercenary!" Without hesitation, Bogdanov thrust his left arm in as well. But dodging those four claws, Bauser slashed out with another blow as he retreated.
"Riot! Now!" He roared and leaped far backward.
Seizing the moment Bogdanov's attention was diverted, Riot regained her composure and took aim. She swung his blade upward from a low stance.
"Shi-eyaaaaaaaah!" The Battle Armor Demon's roar shook the snowy plain.
But Bogdanov, still smiling, dodged the blow. Then he turned around. Before him stood Bauser, charging once more. Their eyes met for an instant. Then he smiled.
"You're in my way, human...!"
"Gaaaahhh!"
"Bauser!" Riot's lips trembled.
Bogdanov's right arm was deeply embedded in the mercenary's abdomen. Its four claws had pierced through Bauser's torso, emerging from his back.
"Ah… ahh…" Bauser looked down at his own stomach as if it were someone else's. But the moment the Blood Oath member pulled out his claws, a gush of fresh blood began to spurt out.
"Bauser!"
"Captain Bauser!"
For a moment, the gunfire ceased. Before the stunned soldiers' eyes, Bauser sank into a sea of his own blood.

“What a foolish man…” Scoffing, the Blood Oath-sworn turned his gaze to Riot. “It’s laughable to challenge me in a physical fight. I’m not gonna finish him off – let him writhe in agony…”

“Gah... gah... gah...” Bauser’s groans were no longer even audible. Blood gushed from the back of his throat, choking him. Drowning in his own blood, the mercenary clawed at the snow. Several soldiers rushed over in a panic.

“Don’t die on me, Bauser!” Shouting, Riott dashed forward, but Bogdanov leaped down from above. His raised claws closed in from both sides.

“It’s too late, Battle Armor Demon!” Reacting to the cry, Riot raised her sword as well. And she cursed her own mistake.

“Damn it...!” The sword, raised reflexively, collided head-on with the Blood Oath’s arm. In that instant, a crack appeared in the Zodanium blade. Immediately afterward, it snapped clean off at the hilt. The shattered blade flew through the air and plunged deep into the snow.

“Now you have no weapon!”

Riot froze at the mocking laughter before her. There was no time to pull out her prosthetic arm. As Bogdanov’s claws reached the tip of his nose, the Battle Armor Demon held her breath. But...

“Gaaaaah!” With a blood-curdling scream, the Blood Oath-sworn fell backward.

In a panic, Riot leaped to the side. A bullet had embedded itself in Bogdanov’s temple from somewhere. It was undoubtedly a Zodanium round.

“Reys!” Remembering the only one she knew possessing such precision, Riot shouted. Immediately afterward, a clear voice echoed.

“Second strike...” A strangely familiar voice rang out through the street. “Life Transfer Healing!” From the far end of the snow-covered street, a trail of holy light rapidly approached. That light, resembling a white comet, struck the crouching Bauser directly. Then, it enveloped the mercenary in a pale glow.

“...This… is...”

“...Justice!” Bowser snapped back to his senses as the pain faded. His wound had closed, and the shock of blood loss felt like a lie. He looked up, his mouth agape. Deep within Riot’s chest, that name echoed. The Battle Armor Demon dropped the sword that had lost its blade and, with empty and gazed toward the source of the voice.

There stood a small boy. His sacred robes fluttered in the blizzard as he gripped his holy staff tightly.

“Riot, I’m coming now!” As the boy shouted and dashed forward, Bogdanov’s expression darkened, and he bared his teeth.

“If only you’d just stayed and rotted in that prison!”

“It won’t be that easy!” Justice declared resolutely. “I cannot let a Blood Ally go unpunished! In the name of the God of Creation, I banish you to eternal darkness!”

“What can you possibly do on your own!” Bogdanov, too, roared with fury. “After all, you’re just a single Holy War Officer!”

“He’s not alone!” The defiant voice came from behind Justice. Keeping his sights locked on Bogdanov’s forehead, the sniper slowly approached.

“Reys, you…”

"Old man Bauser's been out cold for a while!" He spat out the words without taking his eyes off the target. Reys pressed his lips tightly together. "I won't give up this prey!"
"How clever of you…" Bogdanov's expression flickered with scorn and dissatisfaction.
But with resolve, Reys pressed the muzzle against him. Through the scope, his gaze locked with the Blood Oath-sworn. He fired a shot between his eyebrows... then another in quick succession.
"Guh... gggguh...!" The Blood Sworn retreated, but Reys wouldn't let him. He drove a chunk of Zodanium into Bogdanov's face. "Arrogance invites death, you brat...!" Bogdanov boldly swung his arm upward - but Reys remained silent, not backing down a single step - he merely stared at the Blood Ally with a cold, ruthless gaze, feeding bullets into the chamber with mechanical precision.
(I won't run away anymore... Not from this guy, never again...)
He fired another shot right at his throat. "It's over, Bogdanov!"
Justice also formed the Holy Seal and thrust his Holy War Staff forward. "Return to eternal darkness alongside N'gai-Veil!" He concentrated his will and began amplifying the miracle.
But Bogdanov, too, steeled his resolve once more. "How foolish, Holy Warrior... Do you think that my master has no strength left...? That will be your undoing...!"
Riot braced herself. Justice should have only one miracle left. A miss is not an option.
"Bauser, the sword!" Riot locked eyes with Bauser.
Bauser, too, had already hurled the sword in his palm toward the Battle Armor Demon. "I'm counting on you, Battle Armor Demon!"
She caught it firmly and set the tip in place.
But...
"What is the matter, my lord! Answer my call! Grant me power... now! Why do you ignore my plea!" In a daze, Bogdanov suddenly looked down at his own arms. They were gradually cracking and crumbling away. Realizing the worst had happened, the Blood Oath member let out a bloodcurdling scream. "Aaaaaaah!!!"
At the same moment, voices blared from Riot and Bowser's headphones.
"Can you hear me? This is Roel... A transmission from the Third Papal Regiment... The Evil God Lord N'gai Veil has been repelled... The relief force has broken through the Fuldah Gorge!"
The two exchanged glances and breathed a sigh of relief.
"What's wrong? Your Master is not here?
"Can't reach him?"
Bogdanov was furious at his crumbling body - then he looked down at Justice.
The Holy War Officer had locked onto his target.
"I'll take you down with me! Then the seal of the Evil God Emperor would be..."
"Miracle amplification complete! Final strike!" Justice did not respond to his rage. He thrust the Holy Seal forcefully toward the Blood Oath Sworn. "Divine Inferno Downfall!"
"Aaaahhh!" The miracle erupted from beneath the Blood Oath's feet. A row of ancient sacred characters, shining white, flowed in a spiral, binding Bogdanov's body. Just as they bound him all the way to the top of his head, flames burst upward in one go. The flames sent by the God of Creation scorched Bogdanov's body.

“Just look at your hands—everyone will curse you! No one will believe that you’re a Holy War Officer!”

“I’m right here, you idiot!” Reys quietly pulled the trigger. “I won’t let anyone say that about Justice! No!” The bullet embedded itself in Bogdanov’s right eye.

“Shoot! Everyone, shoot! Protect Justice! Fire away!” The volunteer soldiers’ gunfire followed, piercing the Blood Sworn’s flesh. Body fluids sprayed up like a fountain.

“You can’t trick me!” The Blood Pact member made a final desperate struggle. He opened his mouth wide, facing Justice - from the depths of his throat, a chill white mist surged forth. “You are no Holy Warrior!  You are certainly no Holy Warrior!”

“Watch out, Justice!” Reys shouted, trying to pull him back. But the Holy Warrior didn’t budge an inch.

Behind Bogdanov, Riot had leaped forward.

“Battle Armor Demon, get out of my wa-“

“Go to the afterlife!” She swung her greatsword down, severing the Blood Pact member’s head. The gruesome head rolled across the snow. The body, engulfed in flames, melted away, dissolving into a gooey mess.

"Riot... thank you..." Smiling as he thanked her, Justice dropped to one knee. Riot embraced him.
"I'm the one who should be thanking you. Good work today, Justice..." The light of the red heretical crest illuminated their faces.
Reys and the others were also staring at the eerie light. Bauser looked up and sensed someone approaching.
"Reys! Bro!" Def and Jam were running toward them, kicking up snow as they went.
Countless volunteer soldiers, along with an even larger line of civilians, were heading this way as well. Surveying the sea of people, Reize said, "See, Justice…" Reys placed a hand on the Holy War Officer's shoulder. "No one doubts you... even if they saw that mark..."
"Thank you, but..."
"...You saved this town..." Interrupting him, Bauser exhaled a white puff of breath into the air. "You saved twelve thousand lives... There's no one left who doubts you..." Then the mercenary put the broken cigarette back in his mouth.
"...If you weren't a kid, I'd buy you a drink... Anyway, you did a great job..."
Justice smiled back happily. The Battle Armor Demon watched the scene with a warm smile. "You can sleep now, Justice..." The Battle Armor Demon wiped the sweat from her partner's forehead. "The battle is over... Let's rest quietly for a while..." The weight of the boy in her arms felt strangely comforting. Her partner had returned. To the Armored Demon's arms…
"I don't think so…"
At the sudden voice, everyone turned around and were filled with terror at the eerie sight. Bogdanov's head was burning to ashes, yet he continued to laugh defiantly.
"This is an age of endless war... There can be no time for rest... And forever... your existence will never be accepted... after all, you are..."
"Shut up!" Riot drew her pistol from her waist. The bullet pierced the skull at an angle. Bogdanov's head shattered into a million pieces.
At the sight, Justice's lips trembled slightly. "Surely he didn't… mean Dad…"
But there was no reply.
Riot's grip on the pistol stiffened. A blizzard swept past their backs with a roar.
It was a merciless gale that seemed like the mocking laughter of the Blood Sworn.

## 【Epilogue】

"...Roel... Roel..."
Someone was calling out to her from afar. She jolted awake in the dim light.
Sitting up in bed, Roel bit her lip against the excruciating pain in both arms. "Ah... Ouch..."
"You should go back to sleep... Your injuries are severe..."
"Justice...!" Roel was startled by the boy smiling beside her.
Then, for the first time, she looked down at his own arms. From his wrists to his elbows, they were tightly wrapped in white bandages. The underground conference room was filled with countless beds. The makeshift field hospital was filled with the groans of the wounded and the smell of antiseptic. Justice sat down on a small chair and gently supported Roel's back.

"T-the battle…"
"It ended awhile ago…" Suddenly, a voice came from above. "Bogdanov and his patron Demon are gone… Weimar won." Riot, standing by her bedside, said with a smile.
Then, from the bed next to hers, Hayate sat up and nodded with a peaceful expression. "Yes, it's over. Everything…"
"Ah…" In that instant, Roel was speechless. As all the strength drained from her body, a strong sob welled up in her throat. Fighting it back, the girl bit her lip. "...It's over... It's really over..." All her emotions burst forth at once, turning into tears. Justice gently stroked her trembling back.
"I'm glad... I'm happy too..."
"...Thank you, Justice..."
"Well then... I'll get going now..."
"Huh...?"
Justice stood up, Holy War Staff in hand, before Roel, who was looking up at him.
Riot also had a backpack with her. "We've been indebted to you. It's a bit sudden... but with that, we'll be taking our leave."
"Wait! Are you leaving town?"
"The battle is over, after all..." Justice replied with a weary smile. "We're still on our journey… I'm sorry to leave, but we can't stay here forever…"
"Why! Hey, tell me why!" Ignoring the pain in her arm, Roel clung to Justice. "I haven't even thanked you yet! And I need to… apologize to you!"
"You just thanked me. And… there's nothing to apologize for…" Justice gently pulled Roel's hand away. The boy's hand was wrapped in thick gloves. Even so… a red glow was seeping through. "It still… won't go away…" Justice said apologetically.
"The Third Papal Regiment will be here soon. I don't want them to get the wrong idea."
"Basically, we just don't want any trouble." Riot shrugged. "It's a hassle to explain everything, isn't it? That's why we're getting out of here fast."
"I'll explain!"
"Thanks. But you've already got plenty of other work to do, don't you?"
Riot glanced behind her. Wounded people lying on the ground, medical officers rushing back and forth, families clinging to the bodies of the dead.
"The real hardship for this town isn't just beginning. We'll have to work hard to rebuild it."
"Then let's do it together..."
"That's impossible, Lady Roel." Hayate spoke up from the side. "They have their own journey to take... We have to let them go."
Roel's lips trembled, and she began to cry. "Where are you going..." She clutched Justice's hand and asked. "Why are you leaving... Please, just tell me why..."
"That is..."
Just as Justice hesitated, a massive figure burst into the field hospital. "They're here, Justice! It's the advance party from the Papal Regiment!" Bauser shouted, a cigarette still clenched between his teeth. "Hurry up and go, or they'll find you! Reys is getting a car ready at the depot!"
"Sorry, we're leaving right now!"
"Whoa, you two are holding hands. Is it that hard to say goodbye?"
"N-no way…!" Riot nudged the blushing Justice and grinned.

“That’s youth for you, Justice! You know, Roel, I’m getting kind of jealous here!”
“R-Riot!”
But ignoring her partner’s protest, the Battle Armor Demon gave Bauser a light pat on the shoulder. “Thanks for your hard work as my temporary partner. Hope we meet again.”
“You sure you’re not gonna miss me?”
“You’re kidding! I’m a total lookist!” Then, she turned back to Hayate in the bed. The strategist gave a gentle smile and saluted.
Riot returned the salute and quickly turned her back. “I’m heading out first, Justice!”
“O-okay!” His face still bright red, he squeezed Roel’s hand tightly. “I’ll… come back someday!”
“Justice!” But the boy, too, dashed out of the ward.
Watching the two of them run off without even looking back, Roel slumped her shoulders heavily. “Like this… like this… so suddenly…”
But Hayate smiled and murmured. “Isn’t that for the best? Even if you stay for a long time, parting is still painful. I know that very well…”
“Yeah, I guess they’re leaving.” Bauser exhaled a wisp of smoke, looking lonely. “Those two... I guess this how they always say goodbye...”
At the mercenary’s words, Roel shed another tear. Looking up, she saw powdery snow swirling in the air. The sky over Weimar remained shrouded in thick snow clouds - but the cold no longer held a shred of its former ferocity.
The falling snow quietly watched the two of them depart.

“Well, I’m afraid I’ll have to take you up on that.” Riot smiled as she looked at the four-wheel-drive armed buggy. “Honestly, just the thought of walking on these snowy roads again was making me dizzy.”
“The tank’s almost full. I’ve also loaded up about 100 liters of spare fuel.
“And the maintenance’s spot on. I’ve loaded a week’s worth of food, so there shouldn’t be any problems.”
Def and Jam, covered in machine oil, announced cheerfully. Indeed, the backseat of the buggy was crammed full of fuel cans and food supplies.
“So much…”
“It’s fine. Take it.” To the worried Justice, Reys rubbed his chin with his finger. “The siege is over now. Besides… I need to thank you guys too…” Saying this, he forcefully took Justice’s hand. “Come back again sometime…”
“Reys…” Justice’s hand still glowed with a dull red light beneath his glove. But paying no mind, Def, Jam, and the other child soldiers took turns clasping that small hand.
“Take care…”
“Thanks…”
“Let’s meet again…”
“Thanks… everyone…”
Unable to hold back, Justice looked down.
Smiling at the sight, Riot revved the engine of the armed buggy loudly. “Don’t go getting all teary-eyed, you’re a man! Let’s get going, Justice!”
“Ah… yeah…”

"Lord Justice, don't go!" A little girl threw herself into Justice's arms, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Rimuro…"

"I don't want you to go! Please stay here!" Sniffling softly, Rimuro pressed her tears against his sacred armor.

Reys gently pulled her away. "Don't be so selfish, Rimuro. Justice will be back soon. Just wait a little while..."

"Really? Is that really true?"

"It's true. I'll come back to see you..." Justice stroked her black hair and kissed her forehead. "When my journey is over, I'm sure..."

"Justice!" Called by Riot, the young Holy War Officer climbed into the buggy as well.

"Everyone, take care! Thank you!

Kicking up snow, the buggy raced down the muddy road. Leaning back in the passenger seat, Justice finally surrendered to sleep. "I'm going to sleep for a bit, Riot..." He muttered, exhaling deeply. "Wake me up when we get there… Our next destination is…" He started to say, but fell asleep.

Riot, gripping the steering wheel, looked at him in mild exasperation for a moment, then smiled. The streets of Weimar, reflected in the rearview mirror, gradually receded into the distance. Soon, the peaks of Saxony came into view, pointing the way to a new journey.

"We can always come back, Justice..." She spoke to his sleeping partner. "Once your journey is over..." She whispered, then pressed down on the accelerator. Her voice, filled with resolve, was drowned out by the roar of the engine.

Even so, the boy who had fought his battles remained fast asleep.

## 【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

People sometimes ask me things like, "Can you play any instruments, Mr. Ichikawa?"

That's usually when I publish fantasy novels (like this series) that incorporate musical themes.

The answer is... "Not at all!"

I stumbled right from the start—even with the harmonica we learn in first grade.

When it came to instruments that actually required proper fingering—like the recorder, the organ, or the guitar—I just wanted to cry out, "Give me a break!"

I still can't even touch-type on a word processor.

So, if you ask if I hate music, the answer is actually that I love listening to it.

It all started with two movies I saw in elementary school: "Flash Gordon" and "Apocalypse Now".

Both are more "cult classics" than "masterpieces," but I'll ignore that for now.

The moment I first heard a Queen song during the opening of "Flash Gordon"!

I'll never forget the goosebumps that suddenly ran down my spine as I sat in that movie theater seat.

The powerful, crystal-clear vocals. The guitar solo—poignant yet brimming with hope.

To put it dramatically, that moment was my first encounter with rock music.

On the other hand, "Apocalypse Now" was a strange musical experience that slowly but surely captivated me.

The eerie atmosphere of The Doors' "The End," which plays throughout the film.
Its cryptic lyrics. The endless, repeated roar of expletives.
Yet, for some reason, I found myself drawn to that ominous track, which runs over eleven minutes long.
Listening to it with headphones in a pitch-black room doubles the impact—good kids, don't try this at home.
"So, do you listen to music while you're writing your novels?"
People ask me that, but actually, I don't. On the contrary, I write my manuscripts wearing earplugs.
If I play my favorite songs, I get too hyped up and can't focus on writing.
So, I wrote this book, "Dark Frontier Blues 2", with earplugs in.
It's not a tagline from some sci-fi movie, but: "This time, it's war!"
If you have any thoughts, please do write to me. It might take a little while, but I'll reply.
I'd also like to thank everyone who sent me messages about Volume 1!
Please continue to follow Justice and Riot's journey!
And once again, Poporucha-san has graced this volume with her beautiful illustrations.
If you've fallen in love with the illustrations in this book, please be sure to check out Poporucha-san's website.
It's packed with wonderful "cute-style" illustrations!
I'm truly sorry to those of you who don't have a computer…
Finally, just like in Volume 1, please allow me to wrap things up with the origins of "Miracle" and "Magic" names.
Let's meet again somewhere on the New Continent.
Hopefully, next time a little sooner…

Takeo Ichikawa

| 《Song Title, | Band Name, | Album Title, | Year of Release》 |
|---|---|---|---|
| TRAPPED UNDER ICE | METTALLICA | (RIDE THE LIGHTNING) | 1984 |
| COLD AS ICE | FOREIGNER | (FOREIGNER) | 1977 |
| FLASH OF THE BLADE | IRON MAIDEN | (POWERSLAVE) | 1984 |
| HELL FREEZES OVER | EAGLES | (HELL FREEZES OVER) | 1994 |
| COLD WIND TO VALHALLA | JETHRO TULL | (MINSTREL IN THE GALLERY) | 1975 |
| DEAD WINTER DEAD | SAVATAGE | (DEAD WINTER DEAD) | 1985 |

*Translator's note:*

Hi guys! NineSoulsSea here, hope you enjoyed this translation of **Takeo Ichikawa**'s light novel, **Dark Frontier Blues 2**! As always, a huge shoutout goes to aNobody101 for informing me of the method for obtaining raws from Bookwalker! After translating 5 books to Ichikawa-sensei I've noticed that he really likes to incorporate military elements into his work – probably his inner wargamer spilling out, hahaha! That and, I guess, gruesome transformations and people dying in excruciatingly brutal ways, haha! Not a complaint at all, though, on the contrary, I think that gives his works that bit of author's charm! I do wonder if military elements are also prevalent in his latest series**, Setsuna no Iguzaruto**… We'll see! There's still two more books in the series so **Dark Frontier Blues 3** is up next! I've already started work on it so it shouldn't take long! Get excited!

And that's about it! Thank you for reading and have a peaceful day!